

No 44.

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WIDE AWAKE

A COMPLETE
STORY

WEEKLY.

EVERY
WEEK.

YOUNG WIDE AWAKE'S HOOK & LADDER — WORK; — OR, THE MANIAC FIRE FIEND OF BELMONT.

By ROBERT LENNOX.



Brad stood tied to the door, paralyzed with fright. "I'll give ye a taste of what fire's like!" roared the maniac, thrusting the blazing torch close. "We've got the fire fiend at last!" roared Young Wide Awake, bursting in through the window.

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Young Wide Awake's Hook and Ladder Work

OR,

The Maniac Fire Fiend of Belmont

By **ROBERT LENNOX**

CHAPTER I.

THE FIRE FIEND'S WORK.

Clang!

"There it goes again!" muttered Young Wide Awake, springing from his seat in the High School study room.

Clang!

At the second note of the alarm Young Wide Awake and several others of the fellows were in the coat-room, on their way out.

At the third note the swiftly moving bell of the Belmont fire-alarm service paused briefly.

"Three?" wondered Young Wide Awake, as, out on the street, he led his little force on a fast run toward the engine house of Washington One.

Clang! clang!

"Thirty-two!" rang half a dozen voices at once.

Further down the street a few other youngsters had raced out of the yard of the grammar school.

Turning into the main thoroughfare of the town, these two squads of runners saw a few other boys ahead of them.

These latter were young clerks in the Main Street stores.

All these youngsters together, with a few more yet to come from the factories, comprised the fire company known as Washington One.

This company ran with its own engine and hose wagon.

The members, headed by young Captain Dick Halstead, almost always spoken of as Young Wide Awake, were all

boys between the ages of fifteen and eighteen, with the single exception of Ted Lester, fourteen years old.

Ted was the orphaned nephew of John Lester, the richest man in Belmont.

Belmont had been all but startled when it had first been proposed to add a company of boy firemen to the local fire department.

But under such leadership as Young Wide Awake's the experiment had been a success from the start.

He was a manly, all-around good fellow, quick, generous, brave, and, above all, a born fire-fighter.

In fact, fire-fighting seemed to come natural to all of them.

Almost any boy of the twenty-eight belonging to Washington One could have taken command of the company fairly well at a fire.

Hal Norton was the lieutenant, and well-nigh as capable as Young Wide Awake himself.

Joe Darrell was foreman of the engine crew, and Terry Rourke, the gallant young son of Erin, with the sun-kissed hair that was not quite red, was foreman of the hose crew.

At all times Terry and Young Wide Awake were chums, together more or less every day, and even devoted to two young ladies who were themselves fast friends, Kitty Lester and Faith Vane.

Hardly thirty seconds after the first members reached the engine house the last members to arrive were there.

The speed was almost dizzying with which these eager fire-fighters got into helmets, boots and coats.

An instant later Young Wide Awake snatched up his trumpet, shouting huskily:

"Roll her out!"

Cheering, as they always did, the young fire-fighters of Belmont ran their engine out of the fire house.

Pellmell after old Washington came the fellows with the hose wagon.

As they turned Main Street and headed for Box 32, which was five blocks up the street and around one corner, they heard the jangling bell of Hook and Ladder One.

This was a men's crew, commanded by big and capable Tom Scott.

On a first alarm, like this, to which only our hero's company and the hook and ladder responded, Young Wide Awake was acting chief until the arrival of big, black-whiskered Chief Pelton.

Clang! came a noisy note from a gong behind.

Young Wide Awake knew, without turning to glance over his shoulder, that Protective One was getting away in good time.

Protective One was also a boy's company, commanded by Fred Parsons, and organized in the interests of the fire insurance companies.

Fred had belonged to Washington One for just one day.

As his father, Banker Parsons, who also had a monopoly of the Belmont fire insurance business, had helped more or less in organizing Washington One, Fred had planned to be elected captain of the company.

The youngsters, however, had preferred Young Wide Awake for their leader.

In electing their other officers to serve under our hero they had again "forgotten" Fred, who, in a rage, had resigned on the night of the election.

Later, when Young Wide Awake had won fame in Belmont as a fire-fighter, Fred had put through the scheme of organizing a protective company.

Besides young Parsons, there were eight other boys, all of whom belonged to the rather wealthier families of Belmont.

The insurance people paid Fred Parsons a salary of a hundred dollars a year as captain of Protective One.

The other eight members received each forty dollars a year.

As all the members of Belmont's regular fire department were unpaid volunteers, Young Wide Awake's company referred to the Protectives as "The Grafters."

But the Protectives had started the calling of names by first of all dubbing the Washingtons "The Hoodlums."

This latter epithet was applied for no better reason than that all of Young Wide Awake's company, with the exception of Ted Lester, came of poor families.

They were not hoodlums in any sense of the word, for a manlier, brighter, cleverer crowd of young fellows it would be hard to find anywhere.

Six of the young Washingtons were employed in Belmont factories, four were clerks in stores, and the remain-

ing eighteen were divided between the High and grammar schools.

One fact that added greatly to the bitterness that Fred Parsons felt toward Young Wide Awake was that our hero had become Fred's successful rival for the favors of sweet Kitty Lester.

"Come along faster," ordered Young Wide Awake, slowing in his run to let the engine crew come up with him. "Protective is catching up with us."

That was enough to rouse Joe Darrell and his engine crew.

Our hero himself gave a hand on the hauling rope, seeing which, Hal also dropped back.

"It's easy for the Protective fellows to get along over the road," grumbled Joe. "We've got this heavy old tub to haul, while Parsons's fellows have nothing but that little, light truck, loaded only with rubber blankets and a few such light things."

Just barely in the lead, Washington One drew up sharply at the box corner.

Young Wide Awake, who had already leaped ahead, quickly located the fire.

From an open bulkhead, leading to the cellar under a store, oil-laden fumes and small clouds of smoke were issuing.

Just as our hero reached the spot the proprietor of the store and his clerk came up the steps with empty buckets.

"It won't take you fellows long to put the trouble out," cried the proprietor.

"Couple the hose, and run the nozzle down here as soon as you're ready, Hal!" shouted our hero through his trumpet.

Ted Lester, who usually ran with our hero as aide, was at Dick's heels as the young captain descended the cellar steps.

"Gasoline again!" grumbled Ted.

"The fire fiend again!" muttered Young Wide Awake, angrily. "This is the third attempt he has made to-day."

Gasoline had been sprinkled on a pile of rubbish at the rear of the cellar.

Some of the oil, too, had been thrown on the rafters and other woodwork overhead.

This had been "touched off" by a cunning hand.

Had the proprietor of the store been ten minutes later in discovering the fire the building must have been doomed.

Prompt first work by the proprietor and his clerk, backed now by the swift, intelligent moves of the young fire-fighters, prevented a serious blaze.

"Here's the hose!" called Hal, as he and Terry came dashing down the steps.

Three or four more fellows came behind them, supporting the rubber lengths.

With them came axemen and polemen.

"Just the hose now!" directed Young Wide Awake, himself guiding the stream toward the rafters overhead.

These timbers drenched, he turned the stream down on the pile of rubbish.

There was a sputtering, hissing protest from the flames, but they were subdued.

"Now, you axemen get in and see if you can find anything that's smouldering under the surface," commanded Young Wide Awake.

"Don't chop down everything," begged the store's owner.

"Our fellows are here to save property, not to destroy it," replied the young fire captain, drily.

"Humph!" muttered Fred Parsons.

"Protective's young captain had followed the fire-fighters down into the cellar to see if there was any property of value to be saved.

"Not much for you to do here, captain," observed Young Wide Awake, briefly.

"I prefer to judge for myself," sneered Parsons, flashing a look of hatred at our hero.

"Please yourself, in your own way," returned Young Wide Awake, shrugging his shoulders.

With another snort, Fred turned his back squarely on his rival.

Our hero was not watching Parsons, however, but had begun to note everything in the cellar, in the hope of gaining some clue to the fire fiend.

For the work of a fire-bug this cellar blaze surely was.

For the third time this morning the fire department had been called out to extinguish a small fire.

In each case the fire had been kindled with the aid of gasoline.

On the day before there had been four such fires, and gasoline used in all of them.

Fortunately all the fires had been put under control promptly.

Yet Belmont was now in a ferment of excitement and dread.

Surely the person who was starting all the fires must be a maniac.

No man with a sound brain could find pleasure in destroying buildings all over town.

Maniacs are generally cunning as well as dangerous.

This maniac, this fire fiend, had been cunning enough, so far, to escape detection.

"You can handle it all now, can't you, Hal?" asked our hero.

"Any baby could," grunted Lieutenant Norton.

Young Wide Awake ran up into the street, whither the proprietor of the store had just gone.

"Mr. Hale," said our hero quietly, "of course this is the work of the fire fiend."

"Of course, Young Wide Awake."

"Did you get a glimpse of any one loitering around—who might be fairly suspected of doing this job?"

"If I had," muttered Hale, "I'd have hollered before now."

"Were there any strangers in your store?"

"None that I can remember."

"And you saw no strangers loitering in the neighborhood?"

"Don't remember any."

"You?" asked our hero, looking at the clerk.

"I was too busy in the store to have time to notice anything," replied the clerk.

"Does any one in this crowd know anything or suspect anything in regard to the fire fiend?" demanded our hero, looking around at his fellow-townsmen. "If any of you have noticed anything that would give a clue, friends, then it's time to speak now. If we don't catch this fire fiend soon a good portion of Belmont is likely to be reduced to ashes."

People in the crowd nodded anxiously, then looked around at each other.

"Huh!" uttered Fred Parsons to his chum, Larry Downes. "When this matter has been sifted down it will be found that Dick Halstead has started the whole thing in order to give himself a chance to spread. He is trying to show what a fireman he is. Catch the fire fiend and make him confess, and you'll find that Halstead put him up to setting these fires."

Our hero could hear every word.

Indeed, Fred Parsons meant that he should hear and feel the sting of suspicion.

Young Wide Awake, with his back turned, waited until Fred had ceased speaking.

Then, though he turned slowly, our hero's eyes blazed into his enemy's.

"What's all that, Parsons?" rasped the young fire captain.

"You needn't take the trouble to address me," growled Parsons, sulkily.

"But I will address you!" thundered Young Wide Awake, taking another step toward his enemy. "Parsons, the statement you just made is a lie!"

"What's that?" blazed Fred, coloring and starting forward.

"It's a lie," Young Wide Awake repeated, coolly. "Therefore, you're a liar!"

"Take that back!" hissed Fred.

"I'll take nothing back," smiled Young Wide Awake, contemptuously. "You're a liar. The remark that you made was worthy only of a coward. Therefore you're a coward as well as a liar!"

With a gasp of rage, Parsons clenched both of his fists, as he took another step forward.

But Young Wide Awake, without putting up his hands or making any move on the defensive, stood smiling into the face of the other boy.

"You're enough of a liar, Parsons, to want other people to think you're brave, which you're not. You'd jump on me and try to knock me down—only you're too big a coward to dare. Some day, Fred Parsons, you may get to see yourself just as other people see you now—a big bag of wind, with an unpleasant odor to it!"

It was a merciless roast, such as Young Wide Awake could give when stung past endurance.

Any fellow who really deserved to be considered courageous would have fought then and there.

But Parsons, though the angry light did not fade from his eyes, muttered huskily:

"I'll see you at another time for that, Dick Halstead!"

"If nothing happens to me until you do it, what a long and safe life I'll live!" chuckled Young Wide Awake, then turned on his heel, leaving Parsons and the Protectives all writhing under a sense of public defeat and shame.

As Protective One was not needed here, anyway, Fred promptly gave the order to return the truck to its house.

As the nine young fellows slowly pulled their truck through the crowd they flushed before many a laughing, guying look.

But Dick, glancing around, saw a woman of the neighborhood cautiously beckoning him with a glance.

That she had something she wished to communicate quietly was apparent.

Young Wide Awake made his way to her side without attracting any attention.

"I don't want to get mixed up in this matter, but I saw something that you ought to know," murmured the woman in a low tone.

"You saw the fire fiend?" whispered Young Wide Awake, eagerly.

"I don't know."

"Saw some one you think may be he?"

"That's what I'm wondering," replied the woman.

"Tell me all about it."

"Well, perhaps ten minutes before the fire alarm was turned in I happened to look out through one of my front windows," went on the woman. "As I did so, I happened to see a man standing looking down the bulkhead."

"That was before the fire was discovered?"

"It was long before the alarm was turned in."

"Did the man you saw, madam, seem to be doing anything in particular?"

"He took what seemed to be a box of matches from his pocket. I thought he was getting ready to smoke; then I noticed that he didn't have any pipe or cigar."

"How long did he stand there at the bulkhead, madam?"

"That I don't know, for I didn't think it was anything out of the usual, so I didn't stay at the window to watch him."

"Had you ever seen the man before?"

"Not that I remember."

Young Wide Awake glanced swiftly around him.

The nearest member of his fire company was Brad Thompson, one of the grammar school boys.

"Brad!" called Young Wide Awake, softly, and Thompson quickly joined them.

"Brad, I want you to listen hard. Now, madam, will you please describe that man as fully as you can?"

"Why, he looked like a man of fifty, with a sallow, rather sunken face. He was a tall, stooping man, and looked far from well," replied the woman.

"Smooth face?" queried our hero.

"No; he had a scraggly beard. Just the glimpse that I had of his face, I thought that his eyes looked rather haunted."

"Well-dressed?"

"No; just the opposite."

"Brad," whispered our hero, "I wish you would get just as careful a description as you can of this man from Mrs. Callender. Then get rid of your fire togs and skirmish around town this afternoon. Look for that man. Look for him everywhere! If you find him, try to get Mrs. Callender to look him over. If she says it's the man she saw over there at the bulkhead, then call on the first citizens or policeman you meet to arrest the fellow!"

"Is it the fire-bug?" whispered Brad, eagerly.

"Probably. Brad, let us see if you can catch him. Mrs. Callender, if Brad finds the man will you go with Brad to make sure it's the same man?"

"I—I suppose I ought to," hesitated the woman.

"You certainly ought, Mrs. Callender. If this fire fiend isn't caught, it may be your house that he burns down next."

"Shall I get any of the other fellows to help?" whispered Brad, eagerly.

He was throbbing with the importance of his new mission to trail down the fire fiend.

"You won't even talk about it to another living soul," retorted Young Wide Awake, crisply. "When you go hunting for criminals or lunatics you don't do it with a brass band, Brad. Remember! Not a word even to your own family."

"Not a word, then, from me," uttered Brad, quietly.

"Slip!"

Brad slipped away.

"You won't say anything, either, Mrs. Callender," urged our hero. This fire fiend would seem to be so clever that we must use silence and all our cleverness to catch him."

"I won't say a word," breathed the woman.

Then, raising his voice, as he lifted his helmet, Young Wide Awake went on:

"I thank you for the idea, Mrs. Callender. I'll lay it before our fellows soon. I think, with you, that it will be an excellent way to raise funds for the company."

Mrs. Callender smiled understandingly at the handsome young fire captain as our hero walked over to where Chief Pelton and Chief of Police Jason Sharp stood chatting in undertones.

"As before, this infernal rascal seems able to get slickly away from us, Young Wide Awake," was Pelton's greeting.

"I want to talk with both of you gentlemen about the matter," replied our hero, in an undertone.

Then he repeated to both of them the information he had received and the use he had made of it.

"I'll send one of my officers out on the trail, too," whispered Chief Sharp, eagerly. "And I'll ferret around myself. We've got to catch this fire fiend before many hours go by, or he'll have the town in ashes!"

As for the rest of the townspeople, who did not know

that the authorities had a slight clew to work on, they were on the anxious seat that day.

In any community the presence of a fire fiend who proves himself clever enough to escape capture and determined enough to keep on lighting incendiary fires—the presence of such a scoundrel strikes terror to the heart of any town!

CHAPTER II.

A MANIAC'S DESPERATE NERVE.

That afternoon was one of anxious, dread waiting.

Those of the youngsters who were not otherwise employed spent most of the afternoon at the engine house, that they might all the more promptly respond to any alarm.

None came in, however.

Young Wide Awake hastened to his home after dark, and he and his mother ate their supper together.

"Going out again, Dick?" asked Mrs. Halstead, as she saw her son, as soon as the meal was over, go to the nail on which his hat and coat hung.

"With a fire fiend loose in Belmont, mother, a fireman can't be too close to his machine."

"The dreadful fellow!" shuddered Mrs. Halstead. "Dick, my boy, are you expected to run yourself into danger trying to hunt that fellow down?"

"There isn't much danger, usually, mother, in hunting down fire-bugs," smiled Young Wide Awake. "Almost without exception fire-bugs are great cowards. They never fight in the open, but sneak in to do their work when they feel sure no one is looking."

"I wonder if you realize, Dick," sighed his mother, as he kissed her, "how often I worry over your fire department duties?"

"I know how disgusted you'd be if I resigned," smiled the youth.

"Oh, of course, a man must be manly and perform all his proper duties."

"And fire-fighting is my duty, mother."

"Young Brad Thompson was just in here looking for you," whispered Terry Rourke, when the young captain reached the fire house.

"Did he leave any kind of message?"

"All he said was, 'Nothing doing yet.'"

"Come on outside, Terry."

Young Wide Awake walked his chum slowly to the corner of Holmes and Main streets, telling him in undertones of the information furnished by Mrs. Callender.

"Now, as we've nothing to do this evening, Terry," suggested Young Wide Awake, "hadn't we better take a turn after this fire fiend ourselves?"

"That's mine," responded Terry, promptly. "But have ye anny idea where to find the spalpeen?"

"If I had, Terry, I would have landed him behind bars long ago. Brad is out looking, and so are the police. Now we'll turn out and add to the hunting force."

"How d'ye figure that the fire fiend hasn't been run acrost already, Dick?" Rourke asked.

"Why, the fellow must be under cover for the time being."

"Planning new rascality?"

"I'm afraid so. But you and I, Terry, may have the luck to run across him if he does venture out to-night."

"Where'll we go first?"

"Has it struck you, old fellow, that all seven of the blazes, so far, have been found on little side streets near Main Street?"

"I'm remimbering that very thing," Terry replied solemnly.

"What does it seem to show you?"

"Thot the spalpeen must be livin' or hidin' on or near Main Street, an' thot, whin he gets ready for another foot-warmer, he simply gets out and back again as quickly as he can."

"That's the look of it all," Young Wide Awake nodded.

"But, shure, the police, with all their inquirin', ought to find some wan thot has a lodger who'll be lookin' like our man," urged Terry.

"The fact is, though, that the police haven't got any such clue yet."

"Thin what do ye make av that?"

"Terry, it looks to me as if the fire fiend has broken in somewhere for his lodging, and the people of the house he's in don't know that he's hiding under their roof."

Terry's eyes gleamed as he saw the reasonableness of this supposition.

"Thin Oi think, Dick, 'tis wrong to be keeping this all a secret. All the folks in town ought to have the description of the spalpeen; every man, woman and kid in Belmont ought to be keeping two eyes open to catch the fellow wid the torch."

"He'd get the alarm with the rest, and quit town, or hide low," argued Young Wide Awake.

"Shure, nobody'd be sorry av the cunning lunatic left town."

"But we don't want him to leave town, except under arrest, old fellow. The folks of Belmont will never feel safe until the fire fiend is caught, identified, and so safely locked up that he simply can't get loose with his torch again. If he got warning now the fellow might escape, lie low, and be back again later on, when the dread had been forgotten."

As they left the more crowded part of the business section of Main Street behind, the two young officers of Washington One walked up and down the side streets.

They went softly, not talking, and keeping as much in the shadows as they could.

So they put in an hour of the early evening.

Yet their trouble was not rewarded by as much as a glimpse of anything or any one suspicious.

"Hist!"

They had just returned to Main Street, at a dark corner, when that soft though sharp hail came from across the street.

Then some one glided over to them.

"Brad!" greeted our hero, eagerly. "Any news, lad?"

"I'm big with it," panted Brad. "Oh, I'm glad you're here, captain!"

"You've seen the fire fiend, then?"

"No; but I've just spoken to a man who has. It was Mr. Curtis, walking into town. He told me about a curious, half-wild-looking man he met up the road a little way."

"A fellow who answered the description we have of the fire fiend?" breathed Young Wide Awake, gripping Brad's arm tightly.

"It must be. I was wondering which road to take after the fellow when I saw you."

Main Street went straight ahead to Sagmore and Porterville, but at the left there was one side street remaining in Belmont, and it went down through a neighborhood of well-to-do residents.

"What did you hear about the fellow? Tell me all as quickly as you can," commanded Young Wide Awake.

"Well," hastened on Brad, "beyond answering to the description, the fellow appeared to be carrying some kind of a timber over his shoulder."

"It wasn't a ladder?"

"No, no!"

"It means mischief, anyway," went on Young Wide Awake, hurriedly. "Brad, you take the first turn to the left. Scout all through that neighborhood, and keep your eyes peeled. If there's a fire to be started, you want to be sure to be on hand to stop the setting of it. If you run across the fire fiend, make sure, somehow, that you land him a prisoner."

"Where'll you two be?" quivered Brad.

"We'll go straight on up the Main Road. There's the Lester mansion, the big Parsons house, and lots of other costly homes on the Main Road. All the houses in this neighborhood would make tempting bait for a fire fiend. Now scoot!"

Off into the darkness like a shadow shot Brad.

Young Wide Awake and his chum, crossing the street again, and then keeping as much out of sight as possible, hastened westward along the Main Road.

Both youngsters were wondering anxiously whether the maniac fire fiend could possibly be thinking of mischief at the great Lester mansion.

For here dwelt Young Wide Awake's new and dear sweetheart, Kitty Lester.

Terry's own sweetheart, Faith Vane, was living for a while under that same roof, the Vane home being in process of rebuilding after a bad fire.

"Av we catch anny wan foolin' around the Lester place!" growled Terry, between his teeth.

"We'll try to make the shortest work of him on record," smiled our hero, grimly.

"Wud ye favor bur-rnin' him at a stake, or boilin' him in oil?" demanded Terry, in an ugly undertone.

"Wait until we catch him! Hullo! See the twin lights ahead, spinning down the street toward us?"

"The Lester auto," thrilled Terry. "Oi wondher av the darlin's ar-re in thot car?"

But Young Wide Awake, instead of answering, suddenly jerked Terry back hard into the deeper shadow.

For up the street, barely seventy-five yards away, our hero had seen a figure dart out from behind trees.

As shown dimly by the still distant light of the auto lamps, this swiftly moving figure carried something long, like a timber.

Placing it in the middle of the road, he darted back toward the shadows.

"Here, you scoundrel!" shouted Young Wide Awake, leaping out of hiding and dashing forward.

Terry was at his side, sprinting neck and neck.

For both felt sure that they had looked upon the wild man—the maniac fire fiend.

Whoever it was, the fellow darted behind the trees and was lost to view.

Yet he had scant need for haste, this stranger, for neither young fireman cast even a glance his way.

Instead, they raced straight toward the timber in the road.

By this time the high-gear auto was all but upon them, coming straight toward them.

There was not even time to lift the timber out of the road.

Young Wide Awake leaped over it, past it, and stood in the road, his waving arms uplifted.

"Toot! toot!" came the answer from the auto's horn.

Then the great, speedy car veered, going around and past the two young men standing there in the middle of the road.

Yet, once past them, the man at the auto's speed lever soon slowed the machine, turned and came back.

The occupants of that car were in time to find Young Wide Awake and Terry Rourke carrying a timber to the side of the road.

Chug! sounded the timber, as it fell.

Then Young Wide Awake hailed:

"Who's in that car?"

"Miss Lester and Miss Vane, and the chauffeur," came the answer, in Kitty's sweet, trained voice.

"Thank heaven we were here, then!"

"Why, what's wrong, Dick?"

"I think it might be just as well if you let me help you out and show you what's wrong," uttered Young Wide Awake, as he stepped to the side of the car.

Kitty Vane, her sweet, healthy-looking face peeping out from a nest of furs, smiled down at the young fire captain as she gave him her hand and stepped to the ground.

Terry was there, waiting to do the gallant for Faith Vane.

"Was that thing in the road?" asked Kitty, her eyes opening very wide as she glanced down at the timber.

It was well-studded with small spikes, the points up.

"It was," responded Young Wide Awake. "And we didn't even have time to lift it out of the way."

"Oi'll be back in a minute!" breathed Terry, fiercely, from the other side of the stone wall.

"Sing out if you get where you want help," Dick called after him.

"Have you any idea who put that thing in the track of our car?" asked Kitty Lester, her lips rather pale and her voice trembling slightly.

"Yes," answered Young Wide Awake, quietly. "That was placed in the road by the fire fiend who threatens to destroy Belmont."

"The fire fiend! Is he a murderer, too, then?" shuddered Faith. "If those spikes had exploded our tires it might have wrecked the machine and killed us."

"The fire fiend didn't care for that," retorted Young Wide Awake, with savage grimness.

"What did he mean?" cried Kitty, looking at her beau's face searchingly. "What did the maniac want?"

"Gasoline, girls."

"Gasoline?" cried both in chorus.

"Exactly that. Every fire that has been started by this maniac has been kindled with gasoline. He has run out of the oil and doesn't dare to buy it at any store. The thought must have occurred to the fire fiend that if he could wreck an auto out on this road, and the people left it to go in search of help, he could then sneak out and draw off all the gasoline he needed."

"And the terrible fellow would risk all our lives that he might have the means of setting more fires!" quivered Kitty.

She trembled as she spoke, whereat Young Wide Awake slipped an encouraging, supporting arm about her waist.

His love affair with Kitty Lester was so new, so recent, that he wondered how she would take this liberty on his part.

But Kitty, if she noticed it at all, did not resent the pressure of his strong young arm.

Instead, she looked into Halstead's face.

"Do you think we had better turn around and go home, Dick? Do you wish us to?"

The hint of a right to ask her to do something was noticed swiftly by the young fireman and quickened his pulse.

"I don't see any reason why you should go home now," he replied. "If your chauffeur runs slowly and watches the light ahead on the road I don't see how you can get into any trouble. I feel sure that the fire fiend is not armed."

"Can't you go with us?" queried Kitty. "You and Terry—when he comes back?"

"Oh, I'd like to," declared Young Wide Awake, quickly; "but I'm afraid I can't. It's really a duty for us to catch this fire fiend, if he can be caught."

"Of course, Kit," broke in Faith, quickly, "for them to desert their duty in the department in order to tour around with a couple of girls wouldn't look exactly manly."

"That it wouldn't," Kitty Lester agreed quickly, for which our hero gave her an instant glance of gratitude.

"Blazes! What's that?" he suddenly uttered.

For a yell had sounded across the field in Terry's tones.

It was a yell not of discovery but of either agony or fright.

CHAPTER III.

TERRY GOES AGAINST IT.

"You'll have—to—excuse me!"

The information floated back over Young Wide Awake's shoulder as he shot forward, cleared the stone wall at a jump and raced swiftly across the frozen field that lay under the pall of darkness.

"Give me a hail, Terry!" shouted the young fireman.

"Here, an' ye can't come too quick!"

Young Wide Awake had the direction well by this time.

He splurged forward, not asking for another hail.

He came upon two great elms that loomed up side by side in the darkness.

Against one of them, rocking his body as if in torment, stood Terry Rourke.

"What on earth——"

"Ammonia," retorted the Irish boy, shortly. "Th' blaggard had himself hid behind this tree. Oi didn't see him until he leaned out and flashed his ammonia gun in me eyes."

"Blinded you?" choked Young Wide Awake, indignantly. "Which way did he go?"

"I didn't see," retorted Terry.

"Of course not. But did you hear him?"

"Oi think he wint thot way," affirmed Terry, blindly thrusting out an arm to indicate the direction.

"Which way?" questioned our hero.

Again Terry held out an arm, pointing in a slightly different direction.

"You're so blinded you don't know directions very well," spoke Young Wide Awake, in instant sympathy. "Terry, you give the girls a hail, or, better still, their chauffeur. Try to get back to the road. The girls will take the best of care of you. 'I'll try to get the scoundrel.'"

"Don't go, old fellow," grunted Terry. "Oi wudn't see ye get what Oi got."

"But I want to get the fellow who gave it to you, Terry—the unhung scoundrel! So, get back to the road—I'm off!"

Though Young Wide Awake hurried on through the darkness, he felt that it was, at best, a hopeless chase.

He reached the further edge of the field, then spent some minutes in exploring.

"Of course, the fellow, who is favored by the darkness and can hear the sounds of our pursuit, has every chance that a clever lunatic would want," grunted the young fireman. "Oh, dear, why couldn't he attack something else instead of the girls' auto, and then we would have caught him."

In the meantime, Terry, still hailing the chauffeur, guided himself as best he could across the field, without eyesight to help him.

But soon the girls, scenting that something was wrong, came along to meet him.

"What has happened?" gasped Faith, her voice trembling.

"Oh, nothing, except thot th' blaggard squirted ammonia in me eyes before Oi cud see him," grunted Terry.

"Oh, you poor, poor fellow!" I'm so sorry!" faltered Faith.

"Thin ye needn't be," returned Rourke, reassuringly; "for 'tis glad Oi am."

"Glad?" echoed Faith, unbelievably.

"Faith, yes," responded the Irish boy. "Glad for th' look of swate concern thot's in yer eyes."

"You can see, then?" cried Faith, eagerly.

"Oi cannot; but Oi can judge yure eyes be the swate tone av yure voice."

Faith Vane in the meantime had been anxiously examining the brimming eyes, that still smarted too much to allow of their seeing anything.

"Will it ease your eyes, Terry, if I bind my handkerchief over them?" asked Faith, ever so gently.

"Annything at all thot ye do will aise thim," returned Rourke, promptly.

"Oh, you poor fellow!" throbbed Faith, slipping a handkerchief softly around his temples. "Do your eyes hurt to that terrible extent?"

"'Tisn't the hur-rt thot's in the eyes," Terry answered gallantly, "but the cure thot's in yure caring about it."

"Oh, you foolish boy!"

Yet Faith gave one of his arms a delighted little squeeze, while Kitty Lester laughed and patted one of his hands.

But Faith's anxiety grew quickly.

"We must get Terry to a doctor's office," she insisted, anxiously. "We must have these poor, suffering eyes properly dressed."

"Then we'll take him home with us," decided Kitty, promptly. "We might go to half a dozen doctors' offices without finding one in. But we can quickly telephone from the house and get up the first one that's at his home."

"Dick, ye spalpeen, are ye coming?" shouted Terry, who was by no means opposed to getting his smarting, burning eyes attended to as soon as it could be done.

There was no answer from the black distance.

"Dick! Dick Halstead, ye spalpeen! Young Wide Awake! Hoo! hoo!"

Then, after another interval of silence, all three of the young people shouted together. Even the chauffeur joined in, next tooting his auto horn like mad.

Yet, though they listened, there came no response from Young Wide Awake.

"'Tis a good moile or two off he is be this toime," sighed Terry. "When he has a chase on, Young Wide Awake niver waits for annything to grow under his feet."

"But you must have your eyes attended to quickly, Terry," insisted Faith. "Kit, we simply must get Mr. Rourke away from here before he has to lose his eyesight for good."

"Of course," Miss Lester agreed quickly. "Take Terry in the car with you. I'll wait here until Dick returns, and then we'll walk up to the house together."

"Now, will ye wait?" asked Terry, indignantly. "Thin

Oi'll wait meself. Oi'm not thot badly hur-rt thot Oi'd let anny young lady stay here alone on this lonely road, wid such a blaggard loose somewhere."

"But you must get to the house, Terry," begged Faith. "Kit, don't you imagine that Mr. Halstead will come straight to the house as soon as he returns to the road?"

"Ye-es," nodded Kitty, slowly.

"Then get in and ride back with us."

"It looks almost like—like—running away from Dick," retorted Kitty, blushing hotly.

Though Terry could not see the blush, he could hear that tone, and understood it well enough.

"Hurrah!" he thought, despite all his pain. "Oi'll have thot much to tell Young Wide Awake about the sweetness av his gir-rl!"

Aided by the chauffeur, and comforted and petted by the two young ladies in little ways that girls understand down to the ground, Terry found that swift return to the Lester house almost a pleasure excursion.

They had called again to Young Wide Awake, just before starting the car, but there had been no answer.

Yet our hero was much closer to them than any of them had imagined.

Having reached the further edge of the field, the young fireman, seeing nothing living, nor hearing any living sound near him, had halted undecidedly.

"Oh, pshaw!" he said in disgust. "It's like looking for the needle in the haystack—worse! The real thing to do now is to get Terry where his injuries can be attended to."

So the young fireman turned, making swift time across the field.

He was almost back at the elms when his foot stubbed in a little hole in the frozen ground.

A little thing, yet as he fell Young Wide Awake struck his forehead fairly against a frozen knob of earth.

Thump! There was a small outpouring of blood from the cut forehead.

The young fireman was unconscious ere he distinctly realized that he had fallen.

Then from the near distance came the calling voices of his friends, just before they returned to the road and the auto.

"Young Wide Awake! Dick! Halstead!"

They were shouting as to the ears of the dead.

Then the auto's lights began to glide back over the road by which the car had come.

Now, with friends gone, Young Wide Awake showed no more signs of stirring.

From behind a hummock of ground a few yards away a human head soon lifted itself cautiously.

This was soon followed by the creeping forward of the long, lank, lean, stooping body of the maniac fire fiend.

He crouched over the young fireman, glaring down with a wild gleam of wickedness in his face.

"Young Wide Awake, the very one who would destroy me!" gloated the cunning maniac.

CHAPTER IV.

YOUNG WIDE AWAKE IN THE TOILS.

A low, hoarse, discordant chuckle came from between the maniac's lips.

"The enemy I want most is delivered into my hands," he muttered in a sing-song voice. "Ah, what a sacrifice to the fire! Mere wooden buildings—what a poor sacrifice! But manhood, young and pulsing, like this—a glorious sacrifice!"

The maniac's chattering, as he still crouched over the boy, half supported on the palms of his hands, was like the chattering of an ape.

"How shall I make the sacrifice?"

That question gave the wild man a good deal of hard thought, seemingly.

He felt at his pockets.

"No gasoline!" he cried tremulously. "And I would have had so much but for the stupid meddling of this young enemy who is now to become a sacrifice."

He pulled out the thin rubber ball that he had used with such fearful success against poor Terry as an ammonia gun.

"Nothing left here," muttered the maniac, "or I'd tie this fool and then let his eyes feel the stinging bath that the other young meddler had."

A quiver ran through Young Wide Awake's body.

"So! The victim—the sacrifice—threatens to recover his senses. Then I must have him quickly where he can do me no harm. But how?"

The maniac glanced down at the ground.

"Once I had a knife, a good one," he muttered. "But that has been lost long ago. Have I no weapon whatever save my poor, weak, trembling hands? Oh! ah!"

The fellow's tremulous fingers closed upon a rough, jagged-edged stone a little smaller than one of his fists.

"Why not?" muttered the maniac. "This will surely crack the strongest skull."

He held the stone poised for an instant just over one of Young Wide Awake's temples.

Then slowly, eyeing his unconscious victim intently, the fire fiend threw back over one shoulder the hand that held the stone.

He was taking aim. In an instant the blow was to fall.

But other eyes looked on at this mad scene through the darkness.

A young figure crept closer and closer, as softly as the mouse moves.

Then, with a swift, sudden leap, Brad Thompson hurled himself upon the fire fiend.

First of all the young fireman fastened both of his hands upon that right wrist of the hand that held the stone.

Wrench! Brad, all fight for his size, now snatched away the stone, next threw all his strength into hurling the maniac fire fiend over upon his side.

"Help! help! I've got the fire-bug!" bellowed Brad. "I've got him—the real and only! Help!"

In another jiffy Brad needed all the help he could get, for his unknown enemy, crawling around upon him, embraced Brad's legs, sending the young fireman toppling hard to the ground close to his young captain.

"Where are you? Hail again!" sounded a voice in the darkness.

"Here!" bawled Brad, as lustily as he could with his face in the dirt. "Come like lightning if you want to save Young Wide Awake!"

A little feminine shriek answered, and the rush of feet that followed was mingled with the swish of skirts.

"What on earth kind of a rescue party is that?" uttered Brad, disgustingly, to himself. "Oh—ouch!"

For the fire fiend, being now all for flight, prevented Brad from darting off after him by giving that youngster an ugly blow in the small of his back.

Brad had rolled over painfully, and was now sitting up by the time that Kitty Lester and her father's chauffeur reached the spot.

"Where's the scoundrel that did this?" demanded Kitty, indignantly, as she fell to her knees beside the unconscious young fireman.

"Just bolted off into the darkness," gritted Brad. "I thought I had him."

"Adams," commanded Miss Kitty, sternly, "get that scoundrel if you possibly can. Don't mind shooting, if you have to do it."

Mr. Lester requiring his chauffeur always to carry a revolver at night, Adams whipped out that weapon as he sprinted away through the darkness.

But he came back just after Miss Kitty had succeeded in getting Young Wide Awake to open his eyes.

"No use, miss," reported Adams, regretfully. "It's that dark I couldn't even get a glimpse at the fellow's shadow."

"You can get up, can't you, Dick?" coaxed Kitty, anxiously.

Our hero, who had been looking curiously into the girl's face, and who had been wondering how he came to be here, responded with a laugh:

"Can I get up? Why, certainly, I can."

With a spring he leaped lightly to his feet, even though he did sway dizzily for a moment.

"How did that wretch get a chance to strike you down?" asked Kitty, wonderingly.

"He didn't," retorted Young Wide Awake. "I tripped my foot in something and went down. Judging by this little lump on my forehead, I must have struck something hard on the ground and hurt myself."

"But that maniac was over you when I got here," Brad broke in. "He was just going to crack your head in with a stone."

Young Wide Awake glanced swiftly but wonderingly from one to another.

"I don't understand it—I'm blessed if I do," he muttered.

"I understand this much," Miss Kitty affirmed, resolutely. "You and Terry seem destined for dangerous ex-

periences to-night. The best thing for both of you is to get under cover, where you can be attended to. Can you think, Dick, of any better safe harbor than the house of the Lesters?"

"I'm sure I can't," laughed Young Wide Awake, glowing.

"Then I am going to take you there. The auto is at the road."

"Is Terry at your house?"

"Unless Faith has turned him loose within the last few minutes," smiled Miss Kitty.

"She wouldn't be heartless enough to turn a blind orphan out into the cold and dark, would she?" asked Young Wide Awake, pathetically.

"Come and see for yourself," advised Kitty.

She took Young Wide Awake's arm, as if to see whether he needed help.

But Dick, with a smile, captured her hand and patted it.

Brad followed them, limping slightly, for his back still hurt where the maniac had struck him.

"Won't you come up with us, too?" asked Kitty, sweetly, turning upon Brad with a smile that won that young fellow on the spot.

But Brad looked at Young Wide Awake, who asked:

"Aren't you going to thank Miss Lester and accept her invitation?"

Brad stammeringly accepted, and was given a seat in the auto beside Adams, while Young Wide Awake and Miss Lester occupied the rear seat.

Somehow, by the time that they got started, Dick's right arm was around Kitty Lester's waist.

"She did not speak, neither did she draw herself away.

Young Wide Awake's heart was beating fast, his hopes running high.

He had wondered whether this superb girl would object to such a liberty. If she did not, then he might regard himself as being reasonably secure in her regard, for Kitty Lester was neither a weather-vane nor a flirt.

"You're making so little objection to my arm being there that I'm not going to take it away," murmured Young Wide Awake, in a low tone.

Kitty glanced into his eyes, smiling frankly, then looked away again.

But she nestled a little closer.

"Confound these auto cars for going so fast!" grumbled the young fireman to himself, for the machine was already turning in at the Lester gate.

Young Wide Awake felt it best to withdraw his arm now, though not until he had first given the girl a brief but harder squeeze.

Terry was in the little reception-room, blinking, yet seeing with his own eyes, despite Miss Faith's willingness to do all his seeing for him.

The doctor had been there and had dressed the eyes and bathed them.

Now, Terry had a bandage that he could slip over his eyes in the colder outer air, but he was not going to use

that bandage in this room and miss the sight of Faith's pretty face and anxious eyes.

"So Miss Kitty found ye, cap?" queried Terry. "Shure, as soon as we got here she insisted on turning back to look for ye."

"I went to escape being snubbed," said Kitty, coloring. "I knew that I wasn't wanted here."

"Kit!" cried Faith, who now found it her turn to blush.

This was before Brad stepped into the room.

When that youngster arrived on the scene the four young people began to wish that he wasn't there.

Poor Brad was a nice enough fellow, but he wasn't needed here just now.

He was like the fifth wheel to a coach, or about as useful as a snow-shovel in summer.

Nevertheless, Miss Kitty was too good a hostess to let Brad see this.

As it was his first time at the house, she promptly took him through the rooms to show him the place.

In the music-room Kitty excused herself for a moment to run back to Young Wide Awake, some question hovering on her pretty lips.

While she and our hero were still chatting, a ripple of music from a piano came to their ears.

That was followed by a crash of chords, next by a blending of harmonies that made all four of the young people start and look at each other.

"Who is playing?" asked Kitty, wonderingly, for she knew of none in the house who could bring such music from the piano.

Young Wide Awake looked puzzled for an instant. Then:

"You left Brad in there, didn't you?"

"Yes, I did."

"I've never heard the lad play before, but I've heard that he is a genius at the piano."

"Genius!" uttered Kitty, softly, as she listened. "I should think so, indeed!"

"Let's go in and listen," suggested Faith, eagerly.

"Can't we hear as well here?" murmured Terry, doubtfully.

So they waited until a brilliant bit of playing ended. Then four young people vied with each other in applauding.

Brad, looking very red, came out, holding his head down with a hang-dog air.

"I ought to have known better, Miss Lester, "but I couldn't seem to help it," Brad confessed. "I hope you'll forgive me."

"Forgive you?" echoed Kitty. "Not until you've played the encore."

Seeing that both girls meant their eager praise, Brad was prevailed upon to go back to the music-room.

"I think he'll play better if we're not in there looking at him," suggested Miss Lester, mildly.

"Do you know, Miss Kitty," murmured Dick, smilingly, and in a low tone, "I think Terry and Miss Vane are on

the verge of spooning. Wouldn't it look better in us to wander away and leave them alone for a little while?"

"Undoubtedly," smiled Kitty, taking our hero's arm.

They stepped into another room.

There, holding each other's hands, they listened until that genius, Brad, finished his second selection at the piano.

Crash! ripple! Brad was just starting in on a third beautiful, spirited bit of music when there came a louder noise:

Clang! clang! clang!

Those three sharp notes on the fire alarm broke the spell.

Brad darted from the piano to the hallway.

Terry snatched a kiss, without waiting to ask for it, and almost fell upon Brad.

Young Wide Awake, too, was at the hall door.

"Oh, surely you don't have to go to this fire?" cried Kitty, anxiously.

"But we do," returned Young Wide Awake, crisply. "This number is one of ours to answer on the first alarm."

"But you have been hurt to-night."

"Others may be in sad danger of being hurt at this instant," returned Young Wide Awake, as he pulled open the door. "People's lives may be in danger at this moment!"

"Wait," interposed Kitty, firmly, as she touched a button, then picked up the receiver of the stable telephone. "I'll see if I can send you in by express. You there, Adams? Can you get the car out at once? Yes? All haste, then, please! I want you to take the young firemen to town."

Then, hanging up the receiver, she turned upon the boys with her quiet smile:

"You'll save time by waiting a moment for the auto. We can improve the time by chatting."

"But you're not going?" appealed Faith, looking sharply at Terry.

"Indeed Oi am!" retorted Young Rourke, with great positiveness.

"With your damaged eyes?"

"It wouldn't do to leave me eyes behoind," Terry objected.

"But that smoke and all the danger. Terry Rourke, it's all but criminal for you to try to answer a fire call in the condition you're in."

"What is th' matter with me condition?" demanded Terry. "Bedad, dear girl, ye'll next be thinkin' that a fireman wid a toothache or earache is due at th' hospital whiniver an alarrum comes in. For thot matter, has a fireman anny roight to go to a foire av he didn't slape well the night before?"

"Don't let him go," appealed Faith, turning upon our hero.

"How can I stop him?" smiled Young Wide Awake.

"Tell Terry he needn't answer the call to-night."

"Well, he needn't, then," admitted our hero.

"As Terry's commanding officer, forbid him to go to the fire," urged Faith.

"Oh! I'm very sorry, but that's different, Miss Vane."

"You won't forbid his going?"

"I've no right to."

"You're Terry's commanding officer."

True; but Terry must be the sole judge of whether he's fit to answer the call."

"You refuse to help me out at all?" pouted Faith.

Then, realizing just what she had said, she blushed furiously.

But Kitty was smiling, and turned away.

Brad discreetly stole out on the veranda to wait for that car.

Young Wide Awake, having a moment of waiting that he could honestly enjoy, turned to his sweetheart, taking her hand and slipping an arm around her waist.

Terry drew Faith behind a hanging drapery nearby.

On to this scene burst a small but active tornado.

Ted Lester, Kitty's young cousin, though he had turned in early, had been awakened by the alarm.

Now, about two-thirds dressed, he bolted down the broad staircase.

At the foot of the stairs, his disgusted eyes took in two very lover-like young couples.

For a moment Ted stared witheringly at them.

"Oh, fudge! Pickles! Caramels!" uttered the youngster, scornfully, promptly joining Brad on the veranda.

"Ted, I'll have you tried for disrespect to your officers," laughed Young Wide Awake, warningly.

"You'd have to state the circumstances of that disrespect, wouldn't you?" clicked back Ted, disrespectfully.

Kitty's light laugh showed that she was not annoyed.

There was no time to say more, for, with a glare of light and a whirr of gearing, the automobile stopped at the door.

Four young firemen piled in in great haste.

"Take good care of yourselves, and keep safe!" cried Miss Kitty after them.

"Wish us success in our duty—that covers all!" Young Wide Awake answered her.

These words were spoken after the auto had started.

Now it whizzed out on to the main road and turned townward.

Between two and three minutes only were needed to take them to the alarm box on Main Street.

"Good heavens!" gasped Dick, as he caught his first glimpse of the flames pouring from a detached brick block. "If this is the fire fiend's work, he couldn't have chosen a place where he could be more wicked!"

The flames came from the office rooms on the second floor of the building.

On the third—upper and topmost story—was a dancing academy for children.

Some four dozen small boys and girls now hung out of the open windows of the dancing school.

Here and there the face of a mother who had come with her little ones could be seen.

A great crowd had already gathered.

"Don't jump! Don't faint! Don't get scared! Wait for the firemen!" bawled Chief of Police Jason Sharp, looking up earnestly at the scared children.

Down Main Street could be heard the bells of Washington One, but Young Wide Awake and his three subordinates, as they leaped from the auto and hurried forward, were the first on the scene.

"Has a second alarm been turned in?" demanded Young Wide Awake, bounding to the side of the chief of police.

"No."

"Why not?"

"I've just got here."

"Turn in a second," directed our hero to Ted, who bounded away.

"Can't those young people get down the stairway?" asked Young Wide Awake.

"No; the stairs above the second floor are blazing hard," replied the police chief, huskily.

"Oh! The fire fiend again, eh?"

"Yes; I can't catch him," sighed Sharp.

"We caught him, but couldn't hold him," returned Young Wide Awake.

"What! You——"

"This is no time for telling stories, chief."

"No—that's so."

Washington One rolling up to the scene now, Young Wide Awake leaped forward to get into helmet and coat.

"Couple the hose, Hal," he ordered his lieutenant. "Get up that staircase as soon as you can. Take axemen, and pikemen, too. Fight the fire for all you're worth. I'm going to look after saving those youngsters until Chief Pelton gets here to relieve me of command."

In a jiffy the hose was coupled and was started up the stairway.

Hardly had Hal's part of the crew started into the building when Tom Scott came up with his crew of Hook and Ladder One.

"Get your longest ladders up to all the windows on the third floor that you can reach, Captain Scott," ordered our hero. "As our fellows are lighter and nimbler, I think we can do the swiftest work on the ladders, while your big fellows can get in with axes and pikes and help Norton in fighting the blaze on the stairway.

"All right," retorted Tom Scott, cheerily.

The ladders came off the truck with a clatter.

Tom's men and the young Washingtons hustled them up to the window-sills above.

"Don't let any of those youngsters come down until we get up there to direct the work!" shouted Young Wide Awake through his trumpet.

Then, turning swiftly upon the remaining members of his company, our hero rapidly selected those who were to assist him in trying to prevent what threatened to be a tremendous loss of young life.

CHAPTER V.

LIFE FIGHTS DEATH ON THE LADDERS.

With a rush the young life-savers swarmed up the three ladders.

Young Wide Awake, Terry and Ted Lester led, eight others following.

"Now, you'll soon be all right," cried the young fire captain, cheerily, as he reached the sill of a window of the dancing school and bounded inside.

The children, though they were undoubtedly frightened, kept quiet.

"Boys back, girls forward!" rang out Young Wide Awake's voice. "Obey quickly, and without confusion."

Then he divided his ten followers up between two of the ladders.

"String out all the way down to the ground," he ordered. "Pass the girls down, helping them. Don't let them get frightened, for there's no need. Go ahead now, little sisters. Down with you, and depend on the fellows who are helping you."

There was a laughing smile on the young fire captain's face that carried courage to all who saw it.

"Now, then, you boys, over to this third ladder. All of you who feel big enough and smart enough may climb down by themselves. Let's see who is to go first."

Most of the young boys eagerly claimed that they could handle themselves on the ladders, as, indeed, they could.

Yet Young Wide Awake picked out five of the boys as appearing too young to go down the ladder by themselves.

"You young shavers wait until the bigger boys are down. We'll help you. There's time enough for us all."

Then Young Wide Awake glided back to the windows where the little girls were being passed down.

The rescue work was going slowly here—as of course it must, since each young fireman had to pass each girl to some other fireman below him.

A few mothers and the dancing teacher and the musician stood by, counseling coolness.

"Why, this is almost like a drill," cried Young Wide Awake, encouragingly. "Nothing like danger in this, is there?"

"That's because you're here, Young Wide Awake," spoke one of the mothers, promptly. "Without system and discipline here, this could easily have been a panic."

"Don't cry, little sister, and don't fight the fireman who's trying to help you!" shouted our hero, down one of the ladders, to a frantic, struggling child. "You are almost to the ground, now, anyway, and can't be hurt. Be a brave little American girl."

The child stopped her frightened antics, allowing her rescuers to pass her quickly to the hands of the crowd below.

"I believe we're going to get every one out safely, after all," muttered Young Wide Awake.

He spoke to himself, not intending his words for any other ears; but one keen-eared mother heard the words, and turned upon him, eyeing him searchingly:

"Had you any doubt, at any time, that you could get us all safely out of here?" she demanded.

"Yes," nodded the young fire captain. "But I'm not afraid now. Discipline is making the work a cinch."

Yet, as he glanced down the front side of the building, from one of the windows, his heart began to quake a bit.

"We ought to have Torrent's stream here now," he muttered. "The fire is making headway on the floor below. Some of us will get cut off up here if we don't get a second stream at work mighty soon. Hullo! Here comes Protective One. What a lot of use those fellows are at a fire!

There was, in truth, the gravest danger that the flames would break out on the second floor and threaten the ladders.

"Joe!" bellowed Young Wide Awake through his trumpet.

"Here, captain!" shouted back Darrell, from his post beside the hand engine.

"Get men from the crowd to give you a hand on the engine bars. Head four or five of the best ladder men up here instantly. I've got some little shavers to pass down to you—then some women."

In hardly a twinkling Joe Darrell and several of his engine crew came swarming up that third ladder.

"Here!" called Young Wide Awake, blithely, and swung out a five-year-old boy to Joe.

A six-year-old followed, until all the little shavers were below.

By this time all of the girls were down over the other two ladders.

"Now the ladies and the dancing master!" roared Young Wide Awake. "Keep cool for about a minute and a half and all of you are down safely."

Working fast, Belmont's younger firemen got the last of that once-scared crowd down to the ground.

It had been accomplished without a single injury to any one, large or small, and in record time.

"That's the way Young Wide Awake always does it!" shouted some man in the crowd of onlookers, and a cheer went up.

Fred Parsons, leaning against the light truck of Protective One, scowled.

"It's always Young Wide Awake," he uttered disgustedly. "He does everything. Doesn't anybody else live in Belmont? The crowd always goes daffy on what one man does."

But the crowd had a new concern to bother it.

"Every one is down, but where is Young Wide Awake?" bawled some one.

Our hero, however, now that all human lives except his own were safe, had turned from life-saving to his next most important duty—fire-fighting.

He ran out to the head of the blazing stairway.

Here the hiss of water on the flames, and the sputter of steam, mingled with the sharp, ringing blows of axes and the ripping of timbers with pikes.

Hal and Tom were having a stubborn fight of it here.

"I don't see that I can help you any from above!" shouted Young Wide Awake through his trumpet.

"Nothing can help us until there's another stream here.

That's what we need!" Lieutenant Hal Norton answered back.

"It's me for the ladder route, then," decided Young Wide Awake.

Two of the ladders were already down.

Young Wide Awake's appearance on the third was hailed with a shout of relief from below.

Quickly and handily he swung himself down through the smoke.

A tongue or two of flame licked out at him as he descended.

Jangle! Torrent One was coming up. Her stream was badly needed on the second floor.

"Protective One!" called Fred Parsons, sharply.

His crew of eight reported back at their truck.

"Get the blankets and other things loose," he directed. "We'll need them in the stores on the ground floor as soon as we know which way the stream is coming."

Clang! That was the gong of Fire Chief Pelton's buggy.

As Young Wide Awake swung down to the ground, he ran to position near Washington One, in order that Chief Pelton might know where to find him.

A fringe of rescued children from the dancing school stood near the engine, in all their party finery.

But as Young Wide Awake glanced at them his gaze fell on one little crippled girl who had been among the rescued.

On account of a withered leg the child could not take dancing lessons.

Yet she was allowed to go to school with her little sister and look on.

The child looked at our hero, started to come forward, then drew back, abashed.

"Were you going to speak to me, Martha?" asked Young Wide Awake, looking down at her with a more friendly smile than before.

"Ye-es," hesitated the child. "That is—no-o!"

"Why, how can it possibly be 'yes' and 'no' at the same time?" laughed the young fire captain.

Martha tried to speak, at the same time making a brave effort to keep back a great big tear that came into either little brown eye.

"Why, what's wrong, little sister?" cried Young Wide Awake, bending over and picking the crippled child up in his arms.

The tears came freely now, while from the puckered little mouth came the sobbing query:

"You didn't see my doll, did you?"

"Doll?"

"Yes."

"Where?"

"Up there. You didn't bring it down with you, did you?"

"What on earth!" gasped Young Wide Awake.

But little Miss Martha evidently took the thing with all possible seriousness.

Then my poor Hulda will die up there! Oh, she'll be burned to death! It seems wicked, don't it?"

"How did you come to leave your doll there?" asked Young Wide Awake, quickly.

"I was playing with Hulda——"

"Where?"

"In the ante-room."

"And when the excitement came you forgot her?"

"No, no, no!" protested the child. "When the fire came some one grabbed me. I had just laid Hulda down to go to sleep. O-o-o-o-oh! Now she must burn to death up there!"

"I wouldn't mind," Young Wide Awake started to say; but as he looked into the eyes of the crippled child he saw that the little woman did mind very much indeed.

She was now sobbing as if everything in life had been lost.

"The poor child," interposed Martha's mother,—Mrs. Curry. "She always believed that Hulda was human. It's a terrible blow for her."

"A baby's grief is as real as a grown-up's, you know, ma'am," our hero replied. "Where did you leave your dolly, Martha?"

"In the ante-room."

"Then don't mind, little sister," cried Young Wide Awake, putting down the child. "I'm going up after Hulda now."

"Oh, Captain Halstead, don't risk your life for a doll!" cried the child's mother, in alarm.

But our hero had broken through the crowd.

Hands had stretched forward to take down the remaining ladder.

"Here! Leave that where it stands!" cried Young Wide Awake, sharply. "I'm going up again."

"What's that about a doll?" cried Chief Pelton, hurrying over to Mrs. Curry.

That woman told him.

"That young reckless—going up there for a mere doll!" uttered Fire Chief Pelton.

He saw his valiant young fire captain fairly running up the ladder, while flames from the second story leaped out at its rungs.

"Come down, Captain Halstead! Come down!" roared Chief Pelton.

But our hero gained the sill.

"Come down! I order you down at once!" roared the chief.

"I'd rather disobey orders than break the child's heart," gulped Young Wide Awake, as he leaped from the sill into the smoke-filled room.

"The young reckless! He's like enough to lose his life up there!" quivered Chief Pelton.

CHAPTER VI.

FRED SEEKS FAME AND FINDS DISGUST.

"There's some one else going up to stand by him!" roared one of the Washington crew.

At that Chief Pelton stepped back.

"Two up there stand a better show than one," he muttered.

"Why, it's Fred Parsons," shouted some one.

There was a gasp of surprise.

It was not common belief that Parsons felt kindly enough toward our hero ever to stand by him in a tight place.

"I'm going up to see about that," uttered Joe.

"No, you're not," retorted Chief Pelton, firmly, as he pushed young Darrel back. "Two fools too many up there now—all to save a doll."

"That's what!" snorted Pelton.

"I don't care a hang about a carload of dolls," sniffed Joe Darrell; "but I do about Young Wide Awake. Let me up that ladder, chief."

"Here, you men, catch hold and swing that ladder away, or it'll be eaten up by fire," ordered Pelton, again pushing Joe back.

The ladder was swung back out of harm's way, just as Parsons sprang in through the window.

Those below with the ladder watched, to place it again when the young men above called for it.

Parsons reached the sill just in time to see our hero disappear through the doorway of the ante-room.

Parsons leaped into the room.

"I don't know what the game is," muttered Fred, grimly, "but I'm tired of hearing nothing but cheers for Young Wide Awake. I'm going to have a bit of the glory and some of the cheering once in a while."

He leaped across the floor.

As he gained the floor of the ante-room, Parsons beheld Young Wide Awake bending over the floor in the corner.

"What's up, Halstead?" yelled Fred, through the smoke.

"You are, it seems," retorted our hero, wheeling. "What brought you here?"

"I came to help."

"You?"

"Why not?"

"You came to help me?"

"I came to help in the work that brought you here."

"Oh, you did?" uttered our hero, quietly. "Good of you, Fred, but I don't believe I shall need any help, after all. I've found her—got her."

"Her?"

Fred Parsons stared in great amazement.

"Yes—her!" retorted Young Wide Awake, with a laugh.

"I've found her, and she's safe and in good condition."

He held out an old, battered doll about twelve inches long.

"What's that thing?" leered Parsons.

"This is the young lady I came up to get," retorted our hero, with another laugh.

"That thing?"

"Speak more respectfully, please, of Miss Hulda!"

"Stop your kidding, Dick Halstead. What are you really doing here?"

"Why, just at this moment I'm on my way out. Come on!"

Young Wide Awake stepped rapidly across the floor of the dancing school.

"Parsons," he called, "did you think there was some glory being handed out up here? Was that why you followed me?"

"I came to see what the game was. I don't know yet."

"Why, there's a child down in the street crying for her lost doll. I pledged myself to get it for her."

"You did—that?"

"Sure! Why not?"

"Well, of all the blanked fools I ever heard of!" gasped Fred Parsons, disgustedly.

Then he added, jeeringly:

"Hadn't you better let me carry the doll down?"

"What's the matter?" asked Young Wide Awake, ironically. "Do you really want the credit, at last, of having rescued something or other?"

"Yes," snapped Fred. "Let me have the doll."

"Not on your life! It's too precious! My word of honor is pledged to little Miss Martha Curry down below."

Young Wide Awake was laughing as they gained the window, yet there was, at the same time, a more than serious look in his fine face.

"Halstead!"

"Young Wide Awake!"

The two hoarse calls came from below.

Both young men thrust their heads out of the window.

Below them the smoke and flame were more threatening than ever.

"Look what a mess your blamed foolishness has got us into!" grumbled Fred, his voice shaking as he gazed below.

"I'm responsible for my own foolishness only," retorted our hero.

"Halstead!" roared Chief Pelton's voice from the crowd below, "when we pass the ladder to the sill skin down like lightning! The rungs will get afire."

"Aye, aye, chief!"

As the firemen swung the ladder closer, Fred Parsons leaped up on the sill.

He reached out his hands as if to grasp the sides of the ladder when it came close.

"Look out!" growled Young Wide Awake, sharply.

"What's wrong?" demanded Fred, stiffly.

"If that ladder hits you——"

"But it won't!"

"If it does——"

"Mind your own business, Halstead!"

"Get back there off the sill, Parsons!" roared up the chief.

But Fred smiled down scornfully.

Realizing the danger that the ladder would be in from flames, Fred had leaped up to the sill full of selfish purpose.

He meant to be the first one down the ladder—to have the first chance for safety.

As the firemen below swung the ladder closer it seemed to sway away from them.

A long affair, it was hard to control at any time, when swinging it against a building.

Of a sudden the ladder was seen to lurch.

Then, ere our hero could pull his companion back, the ladder fell.

Crack! Smash!

There was a sound of breaking glass.

That was followed instantly by a double thud, as the end of the ladder struck Fred on the head, hurling him back into the room.

From below a cry of horror went up, for the strong, bright glare of flame all about had thrown Parsons out into strong relief.

"Are you conscious?" demanded our hero, bending over and shaking his enemy by the shoulder.

No reply, nor even a sign came from Fred as he lay huddled on the floor.

"Knocked silly, all right," gritted Young Wide Awake. "Now I have got my hands full, for sure!"

He sprang to the sill.

"Have this ladder swung back, chief!" he shouted down.

"Come down it at once!"

"Can't! The ladder hit Parsons and stretched him out. I've got to find the safest way to get him down. Don't send any more men up. I'll manage—but swing that ladder back from the flames until I ask for it."

"My son up there, and in danger for his life!" groaned Banker Parsons, who had but just joined the crowd.

Then, raising his voice, he shouted:

"A thousand dollars to the man or men who save my son!"

Half a dozen men, firemen and citizens alike, sprang forward.

But Chief Pelton waved them all back.

"No man shall go up that ladder," he declared. "It would be a wicked risk of life."

"But my son!" shrieked Banker Parsons.

"Your son shall be saved if it is possible," retorted Pelton, gruffly. "Captain Halstead—Young Wide Awake—is up there with him. He'll get both out—if any one can."

CHAPTER VII.

A FOOL AND HIS GLORY.

If either of them was to be gotten out alive, there was no time to be lost or wasted in thinking.

In Young Wide Awake's pockets was a two-foot length of cord.

Whipping this out, he bent to the task of quickly tying Fred Parsons's wrists together.

Fred being limp and helpless, this occupied but a few moments.

"Now, up on your feet with you," grated the young fire captain.

He raised Fred's fastened hands above his head.

Then through the loop formed by Fred's secured arms Young Wide Awake thrust his own head.

Thus Fred rested at our hero's left side, with his arms fastened securely around Dick's neck.

Young Wide Awake's left arm supported Fred's body somewhat.

"It's an awkward harness," flashed our hero. "but it's the only one there's time for."

Then, leaning out over the window-sill, he shouted:

"The ladder now—whenever you're ready!"

"Aye!"

With a quick swing it came back.

Young Wide Awake had drawn back so far that he was not struck by it.

"Quick as you can, now!" shouted Fire Chief Pelton, while a crowd numbering more than a thousand persons held its breath.

"There he is!"

Young Wide Awake appeared on the sill, gripping at the ladder.

"Oh, if he should lose my son!" groaned Mr. Parsons.

"Young Wide Awake won't," retorted Pelton, huskily.

"He'll save both, or neither."

"It isn't your son up there," groaned Mr. Parsons.

"No, but it's my best fireman up there."

"Ah!"

"Oh!"

"Of course, that has to happen!"

The remarks from the onlookers were in shuddering tones.

For, now that our hero and his burden were out on the ladder, and descending, it was found that three rungs, already charred, had burst into flames.

Our hero saw the trouble.

"Shall I come down or go up again?" he hailed to Chief Pelton.

He asked because he knew that the chief was in a better position to see what could be done.

"Come down—like lightning!" gasped Pelton. "The ladder'll break at any second!"

It was not exactly possible, however, to hasten.

Our hero was heavily burdened, for Fred Parsons was no light load.

Moreover, the young fireman was trying to carry his enemy in such a way as not to severely strain Fred's arms at the shoulder sockets.

It was too late to send for a stream to play against the burning ladder.

Both length of hose were inside the building.

Young Wide Awake would be down to the ground ere either hose could be brought to the spot.

As our hero neared the burning rungs, which were some fifteen or sixteen feet from the ground, the cry went up:

"Quick! Careful! The ladder's bending!"

That was the last the gritty young fireman heard by way of caution, for the next instant the burning ladder bent under the weight.

There was a soft hiss as the charred, flaming wood parted.

Then Young Wide Awake, having nothing at which to

clutch as the two halves of the ladder fell apart, plunged straight for the sidewalk.

His comrades were there, waiting for him.

Joe, Terry and three others reached out, catching him under the shoulders to steady him and save him from the jar as much as possible.

Young Wide Awake swayed, for the jar along his spine made his back ache and his head swim.

"Safe!" chuckled Joe.

But Terry, seeing the sway, held to his chum.

"Jarred ye, didn't it, Dick?" he asked.

"Yes. Get Parsons off my neck."

Half a dozen hands reached forward at once to unfasten Fred, who, his feet not striking the ground, had been saved the jar.

"How did he come to follow you, Halstead?" demanded Banker Parsons.

"He thought there was some glory up there, and he wanted his share of it," replied Young Wide Awake, briefly.

"The fool and his glory!" burst in a laughing voice from a bystander.

That sent the laugh around.

Banker Parsons flushed angrily, then flashed white, but held his tongue as two men bore his unconscious son back for attention.

"Fred doesn't seem cut out for being popular," sighed the banker. "Whatever he does, it's generally wrong."

Larry Downes had taken command of the Protectives. They were now busy on the ground floor covering up counters and stock.

But Young Wide Awake, after he had steadied his head from the effects of the rough jarring, stepped over to where big-eyed little Martha Curry stood.

"Oh, thank you ever so much—ever so much—for trying to save my dolly!" cried the child.

"Trying to?" laughed our hero, happily. "Bless your heart, I believe I did save dolly. Here, isn't this Miss Hulda?"

From an inner pocket he drew out the doll, pressing it into the arms of the little cripple.

"O-o-o-oh!" gasped the child.

Before she could find the words to thank him, Young Wide Awake bent and kissed the little face, then bounded away ere the mother could say anything.

Torrent's stream being added to that of Washington, the work of the firemen showed up better now.

Within twenty minutes "all out" was sounded.

But now Chief Pelton concerned himself with tracing the cause of the fire.

He told how strongly the blaze on the stairs had smelled of oil.

The upper hallways of this building had been lighted by kerosene lamps.

"There is where the fire fiend got his oil," uttered Young Wide Awake, disgustingly.

This was borne out by the fact that five coal oil lamps were found, all empty.

"Oh, what a blaze he was able to start with that!" shuddered our hero.

"The worst about this fearful fellow," raged Chief Pelton, "is that he is indifferent to risking human life with his fires."

"When we find the fire fiend," prophesied Young Wide Awake, "I'm willing to gamble that he believes he has a mission to destroy human lives."

"We can't take any half-way measures," went on Chief Pelton, decisively. "We've simply got to find this fire fiend, if we have to turn out the whole town on the chase. You and Rourke and Thompson have seen the fellow. You must give the best description you can."

"We can't give much, at that," grimaced our hero. "It was dark, and the lunatic was sure clever at getting away fast."

Chief of Police Sharp joined the group on the sidewalk.

"You'll find out this much in the end," declared our hero, earnestly. "This dangerous fire fiend is hiding somewhere right in town. Either he is camping in an empty house, or a flat or a stable, or else he's in some house where the other occupants of the house don't even suspect his presence. Mr. Sharp, it's a good chance you'll be taking if you ask all householders in Belmont to search their homes from cellar to attic."

"I'll do it the first thing in the morning," promised the police chief.

"Why not start right now with the people in this crowd?" hinted our hero.

"That's right," nodded Chief Pelton.

So the crowd was appealed to, and a description given of the fire fiend who threatened to destroy the town.

"If we do find the rascal," came an angry roar, "we'll lynch him!"

"No, no, my friends!" protested Jason Sharp, quickly. "If you catch the fire fiend, remember that he's a maniac—a poor fellow who's not right in his head and not responsible for what he does. Capture him, whoever can, but no lynching!"

"I'm going to ask the mayor, the first thing in the morning," grated Chief Pelton, "to appoint a safety committee and to offer a reward for the capture of this fire fiend."

Fred Parsons, having been brought to in a nearby drug-store, was now being taken home in a cab by his father.

"Wide," smiled Chief Pelton, "you want to punch the banker's memory up a bit in the morning."

"Why, chief?"

"When he knew his son was up there, in danger, he offered a thousand dollars reward to whoever brought his son down safely."

"Well?"

"You did the job, didn't you, Wide?"

"I wouldn't get the money, though, sniffed our hero.

"Why not? You earned it."

"But Fred and his father would both say that I decoyed

the lad up there in the hope that he'd find some glory. Say, chief, but you ought to have seen that dude's face when he saw what it was that I really went up after."

"Perhaps you ought to have seen my face when I found out," retorted Pelton, dryly.

"I suppose I would have got a spanking, eh?"

"You sure would, Wide! Of all things—to risk a life for a doll!"

"But, chief, that doll was just as much to crippled little Martha Curry as the child herself would have been to Mrs. Curry."

Pelton did not answer in words, but he gripped his young captain's hand tightly.

After the apparatus had been housed by Belmont's young firemen our hero walked home, accompanied part of the way by Terry Rourke.

"Oi'm doin' some unaisy thinkin'," confided the Irish lad.

"About what, old fellow?"

"About the toime when old Mr. Lester'll be tellin' us we needn't take the trouble t' come to his house so often."

"I've been thinking of that myself," admitted Dick.

"Thin what'll we be sayin', whin he does give us the hint?"

"But will he?"

"Won't he?"

"It's a tough problem, Terry. I begin to think that the young ladies don't mind our calling."

"Ye think?" demanded Terry, with fine scorn. "Bedad, I've settled that question—wid half av the young ladies."

"Meaning Faith?"

"Now, ye don't think I'd be tryin' to ask Miss Kitty too many questions, d'ye, Wide?"

"Mr. Lester seems to like us," went on our hero, talking in a low voice, as the chums halted at a street corner. "The most that he could have against us, I think, is that we're poor boys. As to anything else, he has already received us at his house very cordially. Of course, though, Mr. Lester hardly expected that we'd keep on calling."

"'Tis th' young ladies' fault thot we do," smiled Terry, broadly.

"Terry I don't know what'll happen when Mr. Lester does give us a hint to keep away. There's only one plan I can see ahead of us."

"An' what's that?"

"We'd better not cross the bridge until we come to it."

"Bedad, ivery toime we git near Mr. Lester's house Oi'm shaking for fear we'll find th' bridge there, an' a 'no-crossin' sign up on it."

"If our being poor is our only fault, Terry, I'm going to remedy that."

"How?"

"By being rich myself one of these days."

"Bedad, thin, Oi'm wid ye," retorted the Irish lad, thumping his friend on the shoulder, "Oi'll starrt a bank account in the morning!"

"The whole thing is too big to solve to-night," sighed

Dick. "We'll think it over, in time, and solve it somehow. Terry, nothing but Kitty Lester herself can ever stop my winning her!"

"Shake!" cried Rourke, his eyes beaming with a new light.

Then, seeing a queer light in Halstead's eyes, he laughed as he added:

"'Tis understood, av course, Wide, that 'tis Faith Vane Oi'm talkin' about."

"Good night, Terry!"

"Good night, Wide!"

Twenty minutes after the chums parted Young Wide Awake was in bed.

Yet not to sleep—as yet.

With the fire fiend, Kitty Lester and the details of the night's blaze all passing in review before his mind, how could the young fire captain hope to get to sleep at an early hour.

Until nearly midnight Dick Halstead lay awake, tossing from time to time, and thinking hard.

"What's that?" he asked himself suddenly, his heart beating uneasily.

In another instant he had raised his head, leaning on one elbow, listening with the utmost intentness.

Cr-r-rackle! There could be no mistake about it.

He was too much of a fireman to be fooled in the sound.

With a throb of horror, never stopping to dress, the young fireman leaped from the bed, darting downstairs in his bare feet.

The kitchen wall, near the end of that room, was ablaze, the wood having been well soaked in coal oil.

The burning patch was not yet large.

As he flew down the stairs our hero had brought with him an armful of blankets from his bed.

These he hastily jammed over the burning wooden wall, throwing his weight with the blankets.

In a moment he bent back, covering another part of the wall.

The blankets got slightly afire in the doing of it, but the burning wool the fireman quickly extinguished.

Taken so quickly, the fire was put out with but little effort.

Then Young Wide Awake started to investigate.

A kitchen window had been broken by a light tap near the catch.

The maniac had entered after shoving up the window.

Besides the coal oil sprinkled on the wall, two empty bottles were missing from the pantry.

"He has filled bottles with oil, so as to be ready for more mischief elsewhere," thrilled Young Wide Awake. "Great Scott! what if he's at the front of the house now, making good on the job?"

Stealthily, Young Wide Awake went through to the front of the house.

But all was clear here.

"No, he must have gone elsewhere," muttered Young Wide Awake.

There was a telephone in the house that had been put in lately at the expense of the fire department.

Calling up the police station, our hero was soon talking with Chief Jason Sharp.

"If that infernal scoundrel has gotten oil, there's likely to be more trouble to-night, Wide."

"That's what I'm afraid of. Shall I dress, chief, and hurry out to see if I can find the fellow anywhere?"

"Humph!" returned the chief of police. "By this time, Wide, you should be well aware that you won't catch him. That fire fiend is the fastest sprinter and ghost runner that ever hit this State. No; go back to bed and be ready for the alarm that's likely to come in within the next hour. I'll have my men look for the lunatic."

Young Wide Awake did go up to bed, yet, tired as he was, it was two in the morning before he finally dropped off into a sleep of exhaustion.

CHAPTER VIII.

TERRY REGISTERS "FROM MISSOURI."

Before the next forenoon was far advanced Belmont had taken its fire-fiend scare as seriously as it knew how.

The mayor formed a committee of safety to consider how best to catch this maniac fire fiend.

The committee suggested the offering of a reward of five hundred dollars for the capture of the maniac.

At a special meeting, quickly held, the Council voted that amount as a reward.

There were scores of people now engaged in looking actively for the mysterious wretch.

In addition, every householder had made a search of his premises.

Yet three days passed without finding any clue to the fire fiend.

Then Belmont breathed more easily.

Its human scourge had been frightened into flight, the townspeople believed.

The danger was over, and the scare went with it.

In those three days there was not a single fire alarm, which strengthened the general belief that the fire fiend was now favoring some other community with his presence.

One afternoon, after school and luncheon, Young Wide Awake started for a brisk walk through the country to the south of Belmont.

Yet at all times he was careful to keep within half a mile of Main Street, for there was no telling when the fire alarm might summon him to duty.

At last our hero turned and walked backward.

He had reached the corner of Ellis and Holmes Streets, when he espied Terry, standing near the corner, his sturdy face crossed by smiles and grins.

"Why, Terry, man, you look as though you'd heard the greatest joke of the season."

"Maybe Oi have, Wide," retorted Rourke, mysteriously.

"Out with it, then."

"Guess!"

"I haven't time. Come out with your joke."

"'Tis not mine," Terry asserted. "'Tis what the Protectives are doing."

"Parsons's crowd?"

"The same."

"Well, what are they doing, Terry?"

"Parsons's crowd, so Oi hear, are going in for a course of study."

"Study? What are you talking about, Terry?" demanded our hero, impatiently.

"Well, thin, that's what! They've engaged Professor Shaughnessy for their instructor."

"What kind of study?"

"Palmisthry," declared Terry, solemnly.

"Palmistry? Why, that's the science of reading hands."

"What the Protective boys are afther is the science of where to put their hands," chuckled Terry.

"Boxing?"

"Th' same. Professor Shaughnessy owns a slugging mill down in Lincoln. He comes up here now, I hear, twice a week, to teach the Protectives how to put up their hands."

"It's fine exercise," said Wide, innocently.

"So 'tis," agreed Rourke. "But 'tis not exactly for exercise them byes is wantin' it, Oi'm thinking."

Wide opened his eyes a bit.

"I think I see, old man. Parsons and his friends don't enjoy the story of how we cleaned them out at fisticuffs. They're practicing, so as to be ready, by and by, to change the score."

"'Tis that very way Oi figure it," declared Terry. "An' no ixpinse spared, either. That feller Shaughnessy is one of the quickest hitters that's teaching anywhere. He's full av new ideas for trick blows and the like av that."

"Perhaps our crowd may as well count on being thrashed, then," suggested Young Wide Awake.

"They have me guessin', anyway," allowed Rourke.

Then, of a sudden, glancing down Ellis Street, he gripped our hero's arm.

"That's the dandy!" cried Rourke, nodding down the street at a young man of twenty-eight or so, a jaunty, half-swaggering, quick-stepping, alert-looking and athletic young man who was stepping out from the door of Protective One's house.

"The great and only Shaughnessy!" breathed Dick, curiously.

"Must be," Terry declared. "Yes, he's a boxer, be every cut of his figure!"

Professor Shaughnessy, as he passed the two young firemen, merely looked at them.

Yet there was a flash in his eye as he noted two young men who looked as if they were built to be ideal boxers.

"D'ye remimber the thousand old Parsons offered to the fellow who saved his son at the fire the other night?" asked Terry.

"Yes," replied Young Wide Awake, grimly.

"When ye get the money," prodded Terry, teasingly, will

ye spend some av it in hiring the profissor to come around an' give some of us fellows lessons in the ar-rt?"

"Yes, when I get the money from Parsons," our hero agreed, grimly.

"No need to wait for the money, though," argued Terry, mockingly. "You and Fred Parsons ar-re that kind av friends that ye can ask Fred himself to show ye what the profissor is teaching the Protective boys."

"Oh, they mean to show us, all right, in their own time, and in their own fashion," promised Young Wide Awake.

"Figure on it, Terry, that those fellows are taking lessons in the hope of learning how to thump us as they'd like to."

"Here come two av the new young scientists that ar-re studying undher the profissor," nudged Rourke, glancing down the street.

The two young men who were at that moment leaving the house of Protective One were Fred Parsons and his chum, Larry Downes.

"Do me eyes decieve me," whispered Terry, "or ar-re they already walkin' straighter and holdin' themselves better than they used to?"

"I believe they are holding themselves rather well," replied Young Wide Awake, after a brief look at the pair.

"I wondher av they know how to foight anny better?" asked Rourke, wonderingly.

"Terry!" uttered our hero, sharply.

"Well, me lad?" questioned Rourke, innocently, turning a pair of now mild blue eyes on Young Wide Awake.

"Terry, I didn't like the look of your eyes a second ago."

"Now, didn't ye?" asked the Irish boy, wonderingly.

"There was a look of mischief in them."

"Was there?"

"Yes; and that, in connection with the fact that Parsons and Downes are headed this way, and that you seem to be waiting for them, makes me nervous."

"Ye look loike a lad with a bad case av nerves!" jeered Terry, pleasantly.

"Terry, don't you start any trouble with those fellows."

"Oi wudn't think av it," protested Rourke, promptly.

"I was afraid you might start trouble. Terry, we want to keep out of trouble all we can, and let the other crowd make fools of themselves instead."

"They nade no instruction in that," declared young Rourke.

"Shall we walk on up toward Main Street?" suggested Wide.

"Not until Oi've seen the darlin's go by."

"Terry!"

"Now, lad?"

"No trouble, mind you!"

"Not a bit av it," promised Rourke, instantly.

Fred Parsons, looking ahead, saw the young pair from Washington One.

"Those fellows are up to mischief," he whispered to Larry.

"Let 'em be," said Downes, indifferently.

"Shall we cross the street?" suggested Fred.

"Cross the street?" echoed Larry, contemptuously. "What for?"

So they kept on, nearing our young friends, though looking past the latter as if they did not see them.

"Av ye're looking for the scientist that's instructing ye," grinned Terry, innocently, "he's just caught the throlley at Main Street.

"We haven't asked you for any directions," scowled Fred.

"Oh!" said Terry. "Well, excuse me for bein' intherested in yer lessons in the manly ar-rt. The manly ar-rt? How soon does the profissor think ye'll be good and manly?"

"Do you know anything about minding your own business?" glared Larry.

"Not much," Terry admitted. "Oi'm thinkin' av askin' ye for pointers."

"I could give you a lot," spoke Downs, contemptuously.

"I wish ye'd give me a few of the koind that ye're having fresh every day from the profissor," Terry went on, tantalizingly.

"What could you do with such pointers?" sneered Larry Downes.

He had halted before our young friends, and, being some two and a half inches taller than the Irish lad, was trying to tower over him.

Fred's face betrayed the fact that he wished himself far from this corner, but he could not run off and leave his friend.

"What could Oi do wid pointers?" repeated Terry. "Iverything! Oi'm lately from Missouri, ye know, and Oi loike to be shown things."

"You might learn too much," hinted Downes, in an ugly tone.

"Oh, that's the beauty av gettin' yure education in Missouri," continued Terry. "Ye can niver get enough av annything that's new. Ye can stand bein' shown all day long. In fact, ye have to be shown, av ye come from Missouri."

"One of these days I'll take pleasure in showing you something," replied Larry Downes, stiffly. "I'll take you in on my ragamuffin day."

Terry, much to our hero's surprise, only grinned mildly at the insult.

Still, Young Wide Awake knew that mischief was brewing now.

Terry was doubly dangerous when he was extremely good-natured with an enemy.

"Oi'm wondhering," hinted Rourke, "whether Shaughnessy is teaching ye rale boxing, or just hand-patting."

"Oh, you! Bosh!" glowered Larry, and would have passed on, but Terry, though still smiling, took a quick step that landed him neatly in Larry's forward path.

"Just show me wan or two things now," begged the Irish boy, smilingly. "F'r instance, whin a good-natured gossoon makes believe he's going to rest a hand on the tip av yer chin, thin shoots out his other hand, instead, and caresses ye on the wind, does the profissor show ye the answer?"

Terry put out his right hand, open, and without force, as if to lay it down on Downes's chin, then quickly withdrew the hand just before Downes could brush it aside.

Instead, Terry rested his left hand ever so gently against the bottom of Larry's vest.

"Have ye the answer for that, or does that problem come in a later lesson?" asked Terry, mildly.

"See here, don't get too gay," warned Larry, beginning to lose his patience.

"How can a poor, ignorant little gossoon like me get gay, or aven feel that he'd loike to be gay, whin he has no high-priced profissor to teach him?" queried Terry, innocently. "But av ye can't solve that problem, let me put it to you another way."

Downes was fuming, raging, yet he saw that to turn on his heel and walk quickly away would only make it possible for Terry to send a jeering laugh after him.

"Now, suppose," proposed Terry, "that a gossoon that didn't know anny better was to lead out his right, thin duck, go undher yure ar-rm and land in the small av yure back, just over the kidney? Does the profissor teach ye the prescription for that?"

Terry illustrated with the speed of lightning, yet without force or anger.

He landed a forefinger over Larry's right kidney, then drew back and looked inquiringly into the face of Fred Parsons's friend.

"Ye don't seem to know you're lessons very well yet," nudged Terry. "Ye haven't been able to answer a single question yet."

"I don't have to answer fools' questions," glowered Downes.

"Maybe Oi cud prove that it's no fool's question," hinted Terry, blandly. "Oi'm not half the fool Oi look, for that matter, for Oi can already see wan thing."

"Oh, can you?" sneered Downes.

"Yes. Be the way, d'ye know that Profissor Shaughnessy has two courses av instrunction?"

"Has he?" glared Larry.

"Yes; wan is the course for men, that he gives over at the college up in Waverly. The other course is the wan that he gives at the young ladies' seminary in Lincoln. 'Tis th' seminary, not the college, course that he's giving ye and you're friends."

"Quit your nonsense, you young ragamuffin!" glared Larry, angrily.

"Now, 'tis sorry Oi'd be to be losin' my timper wid a nice, girlish thing loike you, Larry Downes," explained Terry, with an unruffled front.

"Are you calling me girlish?" raged Larry, his face growing black.

"Yes," pursued Terry, coolly, "with apologies to the gir-rls."

"I'll make you eat that, you infernal little hoodlum!" roared Downes.

Tossing caution to the winds now, Downes let his right fly out for a smashing blow on Terry's grinning face.

But the face was not there.

Neither was Terry.

He side-stepped, ducked, swung and landed a hard, rock-like little fist just above Larry's belt.

It stopped the taller boy.

"Ouch!" gasped Larry.

There was a look of pain on his face, though he still glared.

"You little tough!" he panted.

But Terry was not poor enough sportsman to follow up his first blow with a second, which he could easily have done.

"That was wan av the problems Oi was going t' ask ye about," grinned Terry, coolly. "Oi see ye haven't come to it yet. It's in the man's course, and ye're still in the first lessons av the gir-rl's course av Profissor Shaughnessy's instruction."

"I'll show you whether I'm learning anything or not!" roared Larry.

He had got his wind back now, and his temper, under that unmerciful chaffing, was up several degrees higher than it had been before.

He threw himself into the attitude of the boxer.

Terry looked at him with eyes full of mock wonder and admiration.

"Shure, ye've got the pose all right—as well as anny gir-rl iver I saw thry it in a gym," cried Rourke.

"Come on, you little mick!" dared Larry.

"Shure," replied Terry, generously, "Oi'd be afraid Oi'd spoil the pose."

"Is there any fight in you?" demanded Downes, aggressively.

"Not a bit," sighed Terry. "Oi niver had the gir-rls' course undher Shaughnessy. My, my! Don't it hurrt ye to stand loike that? Av it does, rest a moment, thin shift to the other foot."

"I'll stand you on your head!" raged Larry Downes, leaping forward.

Like most brand-new pupils in boxing, he forgot all the science he had been acquiring from his instructor.

But Larry was no weakling. He had well-trained muscles and possessed a good deal of crude strength.

He aimed four or five blows at Terry as quickly as he could shoot them out.

It was all in vain, however, for Terry ducked and side-stepped every time.

Just for a teaser Terry put one in on Downes's ribs.

Then, as he saw that Downes was growing madder, and did not mean to stop, Terry feinted, following it up with a blow that caught Larry just where it made his nose bleed.

But, being not by any means a coward, Larry again sailed in.

"It'd be a shame to hur-rt ye," proposed Terry, dodging two or three blows without really attempting to get in another himself.

"Hurt nothing!" sniffed Downes, angrily.

"That's what Oi said," observed Terry, side-stepping again.

"You're all wind, anyway. You can't fight," fumed Larry.

"Is it so? Thin maybe it's good for me that Oi don't have to be doing any foighting just now!"

That was carrying things altogether too far.

Downes lost the last bit of his temper, and all his caution went with it.

He darted in, trying to grapple, a game in which he might have the better of it on account of Rourke's smaller size and frame.

But Terry objected to being seized.

He made a fake side-step, went the other way instead, then followed up with a crasher than landed on Downes's left eye.

"Ouch!"

The bigger fellow staggered back dizzily.

Then, realizing that Terry was not following up his advantage unfairly, Larry put down his hands, fished out his handkerchief and applied it to his eye.

"Is it closed, lad?" asked Terry, in a voice of so much concern that Larry swore angrily under his breath.

Young Wide Awake had stood by to see fair play, and also to restrain Terry, if the latter's anger carried him too far.

But young Rourke had never been in a better-natured mood in his life.

As Downes's handkerchief went up, a mute, white flag, our hero could not help a smiling glance into Fred Parsons's face.

"You fellows think you're the whole earth, don't you, ever since you got your first invitation to Kit Lester's house?" sneered Fred.

"Don't drag a good girl's name into a street brawl!" warned Young Wide Awake, with a flash of his eyes.

"Huh! She's a pretty cheap girl—to have anything to do with your kind, Halstead!"

Young Wide Awake's face went as white as chalk.

He gulped once or twice, then managed to speak.

"Put up your hands, Fred Parsons. No, you needn't try to back out! It won't do you a bit of good. You've got to fight. I'm going to thump you to a standstill after that insult to a good girl! Up with your hands, or you'll get it before you're ready!"

Fred put up his hands, shaking between rage and fear.

Then Young Wide Awake sailed into him.

Terry's little amusement had passed off without outside spectators.

But just at this instant two boys up on the Main Street corner caught sight of what was going on.

"Row, row, row!" they yelled, and came pelting down the street.

A dozen others heard the cry.

"Row, row, row!" they yelled, and joined in the rush.

Then schoolboys seemed to pour in from all sides.

Yet what they saw they had to take on the jump.

For Young Wide Awake, aroused to his ugliest by the taunt at Kitty Lester, was making the shortest work of the affair that he knew how to do.

First came a hard tap on the nose.

Next Fred's right eye was closed.

Then a blow across the mouth cut his lips and brought more blood.

Young Wide Awake measured his man now and drove in a swinger that caught him under the jaw at the left.

Fred toppled, but Wide darted forward and caught him just in time to prevent Fred from receiving a cracked head on the stone sidewalk.

Then Wide knelt on his chest.

"You apologize, of course?" he demanded, coldly, while eager boys thronged around them in a closely packed ring.

"No!"

"Then you'll have to get up and stand a real fight this time."

"I—can't fight any more—now!"

"It's either fight or apologize, you cur!"

"Then—I apologize," admitted Fred, sulkily. "But you force it from me."

"I don't care how it comes," retorted Wide, while the spectators stood looking on with grins of appreciation. "Now, Parsons, listen! This isn't the tenth part of the thumping you'll have to stand if you ever repeat this offense. I think you understand. You may get up."

Young Wide Awake leaped lightly to his feet.

Then he gripped Rourke by the elbow.

"We've had scene enough here, Terry. Come on."

The two chums walked off up Holmes Street toward Main Street, while the crowd of smaller boys, after looking over Downes and Parsons, gave vent to jeers of derision.

"Say," observed one small, red-headed, freckled urchin, looking at Fred, "why don't you dudes take a few lessons in scrappin'?"

"D'ye know, Wide, it wud be a shame to tell Shaughnessy how badly his pupils profit by his instruction!"

CHAPTER IX.

YOUNG WIDE AWAKE SPOTS A PAIR OF "BUSINESS" MANIACS.

It was early afternoon of the day following.

The young captain of Washington One, having finished his meal after school, had just reached the corner of Main Street, on his way for a little stroll.

Two rough-looking men passed him.

They were dressed like laborers, but it was their faces that caught the young fireman's eye.

They did not look like honest, useful members of society.

"I wonder if they belong in town?" mused Young Wide Awake, watching the pair as they walked in silence up the street. "If folks didn't have an idea what the fire fiend looked like, they'd be spotted in a second."

For one of the pair carried a two-quart can of the kind that painters use to keep oil in.

The rough-looking pair stopped before a paint-supply store, looked in, then entered.

"They're strangers, sure enough," muttered Young Wide Awake to himself. "It may not do any harm to look after them, either."

He passed the open door of the shop just in time to hear one of the pair ask the storekeeper for gasoline.

"You'd have attracted attention to yourself doing that here a few days ago," remarked the storekeeper, as he took the can.

"Why?" asked one of the pair.

"There was a fire fiend in town who used gasoline. But we have a good description of the fire fiend, which neither of you answer. So I guess you can have the oil."

"We want it for a job of cleaning," spoke up one of the pair, quietly.

"Oh, of course it's all right," nodded the storekeeper, handing back the filled can and taking his money.

"Oh, you're on, are you, Wide?" asked the storekeeper, as he encountered our hero at the door.

"Just wondering whether there's anything to be on to," replied the young fire captain. "As I'm out for a walk, anyway, I may as well follow them a little way."

"I hope they're all right," muttered the storekeeper, nervously.

Young Wide Awake did not make it too plain that he was following.

Yet he kept the pair within sight, from a distance.

Their course took them up Main Street, until they had nearly left the town.

Then off to the left they went, toward open country.

"If they have a job, it's queer it isn't in town," muttered Wide. "They surely will bear watching."

He fell back further behind now, though he did not allow himself to lose sight of the pair.

Crossing two wide fields, the pair headed up towards the bare timber of a forest on a hill slope.

Now our hero struck out on another course and reached the woods at a different point.

Though he went noiselessly and cautiously, he lost nothing in speed until he came again in sight of his men.

Young Wide Awake stopped suddenly among the bare trees and bushes just over a little basin in the ground.

Down below him in the basin were his men—and three others!

All five were gathered around a camp-fire.

Near them rested five bicycles.

There were also on the ground bags that looked like tool-bags.

From all real appearances, these were journeymen of some kind—plumbers, perhaps, or tinsmiths.

Yet the young fire captain, having come so far, was not prepared to accept the first indications of what these men might be.

He crouched down close to the ground, for he was within good hearing distance.

"Some trouble getting gasoline in town," remarked one of the pair he had followed.

"What's the matter?" asked another of the five.

"Why, there's been a fire-bug there ahead of us."

"Some feller cutting into our line of business?" asked the other speaker.

"What's that?" gasped Young Wide Awake, listening now with an attention that was almost fierce. "Have I stumbled upon more fire fiends—five of them, at that?"

"Oh, no!" answered the first speaker. "Just some crazy galoot, setting fires for the fun of the thing."

"Huh!"

"Nothing at all like our lay," grinned the first speaker.

"Got your whole plan made for to-night?"

"Yes."

"Let's have it, then."

"Well, you know where you're to set your fire, at just midnight?"

"And Jorgin knows where he's to set his, at just three minutes past midnight?"

"Yes," spoke another of the men.

"In the meantime the other three of us will be near the bank. At midnight we start to get in from the rear, just as soon as the first alarm comes in. Now, Buck, when you've set your fire and turned in your alarm you get on your wheel and come flying for the bank. Jorgin does the same, as soon as he's started his fire good. Don't either of you send in the alarm too soon, 'cause we want the fires to be good ones."

"Oh, you do, do you?" palpitated listening Young Wide Awake.

"The two alarms will pull out the whole fire department and all the police," went on the leader. "It's the cops, of course, that we want to get out of our way. Now, with two of us inside the bank, working the safe, and you other three out watching in the street, we'll pull the job through in record time. If any nosey citizen comes poking around, either before or after the charge is exploded in the bank safe, that citizen is to be shot without nonsense. We're playing for a fifty-thousand-dollar stake, at least, and we can't afford to save cartridges."

"This is where I get out," murmured Young Wide Awake, excitedly. "But I'll mighty soon be back here—with the right sort of a crowd."

He turned to roll slowly away from the spot without noise.

Just at that instant our hero saw, not wholly with pleasure, one of his "crowd."

This was Trot, the mongrel coach dog that slept at the engine house and played the well-acted part of mascot to the young crew of Washington One.

Though Trot usually remained at the engine house, and always responded to all alarms that called out the Washingtons, Trot sometimes came out for a stroll with our hero.

Evidently the dog had been looking for Young Wide Awake this afternoon.

Plainly, too, Trot had struck the scent and followed it,

for, though he did not yet see our hero, he was coming straight along, his nose to the ground.

Young Wide Awake held up a warning finger for silence and no nonsense or jumping.

But Trot, looking up at that moment, caught sight of master and finger.

With a glad yelp he bounded forward.

"What's that noise?" growled a hoarse voice from below.

There was a rush in an instant.

"Young Wide Awake leaped to his feet, turned and tried to sprint away for all he was worth.

But in turning his foot tripped against a bared root.

Thump! He was down like a flash, and ere he could get up he was pinned there by two men.

"We've caught something with a long nose, I reckon," flared the leader of the gang, grimly.

CHAPTER X.

A MASCOT IN NEED.

Gr-r-r!

Trot, not at all liking what he saw happening to his young master, was showing his teeth.

"Shoot the cur, Jorgin," gritted one of the men who had hold of our hero.

Young Wide Awake's heart bounded.

To have the mascot perish would be like losing all luck in a lump.

"Home, Trot!" Young Wide Awake bellowed lustily.

"Home, sir!"

Bang! The shot was fired just as Young Wide Awake was yanked to his feet.

With horror he saw the bullet clip the ground just past the growling, bristling dog.

"Home, Trot—home!" he commanded huskily.

Bang! Again the bullet zipped the ground just past the dog.

But it must have zipped the tip of one of Trot's ears, too, for the dog uttered a yelp as it bounded away.

Bang! The third shot went wide, for now Trot, his tail between his legs, was traveling as fast as he knew how.

"And what are you doing here, younker?" demanded the leader of these yeggmen.

"Awaiting your pleasure, I reckon," uttered Young Wide Awake, grimly.

"None of yer pleasantries!" growled the fellow.

"Well, you're in a position to call for what you want," replied Young Wide Awake, coolly.

A man on either side of him held him now.

But Wide had not even the slightest thought of making any break for freedom at the present.

These men were armed, and yeggmen of this sort, always hounded close by the police, grew so desperate that no sort of violence is past them.

"Been playing the peeper on us, have ye?" demanded the leader.

"I've been taking a walk through the woods with my

dog, if that's what you mean," replied the young fire captain, with a look of great innocence.

"Oh, you have, eh?" sneered the leader. "Your walk ended sooner than ye thought it would, didn't it?"

"That depends on you."

"I think I've seen you before," went on the leader, eyeing our hero keenly. "At a guess I'd say you was looking us over when we bought the gasoline."

Just then the leader, as the wind blew the youth's coat, caught sight of a metal object.

He bounded forward, taking a look at Young Wide Awake's badge.

"Boys," he announced hoarsely, "I guess we've drawn a prize. Unless this younker stole the badge, he's a captain in the fire department down yonder."

There were grunts and whistles of amazement.

"Seems to me," observed the leader gruffly, "that ye're too good to turn loose in a right big hurry."

Slam!

At a sign Young Wide Awake was hurled to the ground.

He was held there, too, while his wrists were made fast behind him.

His feet were next securely lashed together.

While this was going on, our hero was thinking to himself:

"Once before Trot dashed away, got help and brought it to me. Perhaps the good old dog will be as bright this time. He sure ought to be."

Yet this thought could reach other minds, too, for the leader soon exclaimed:

"Boys, that dog that skipped from Jorgin's gun may be a good trailer and may know how to give an alarm. We don't want none of that in ours. Pick the younker up. Don't let any part of him touch the ground. Come on. The rest of us will look after yer wheels."

The two men carrying our hero plunged further into the woods.

By keeping Young Wide Awake's feet or any other part of his body from touching the ground they were keeping any chance of scent from remaining behind them.

It was fully a half mile further back in the woods that they halted.

They even crossed ice three times, to dull the scent more completely.

"It'll be a smart dog that can follow his master now," gruffed one of the bearers, as Young Wide Awake was dumped again to the ground in a dense thicket.

Just beyond the thicket the yeggmen gathered and piled wood for a new fire.

"Don't try to get away, either," warned the leader of the yeggs, just before he departed. "Some of us can shoot better an' further than Jorgins can. Remember that!"

Yet Young Wide Awake, left to himself, lost not a moment in trying to free his wrists.

After ten minutes of effort, however, he felt willing to give it up in despair.

"These wretches are master-hands at tying," he groaned.

"I couldn't get out of this in a year. No wonder they're willing to leave me here. They know how they've left me!"

Just the lowest possible whine greeted his ears.

Then Trot, looking half-scared, crept in through the brush.

The dog, in taking to flight, had not gone far.

Then, turning, the splendid mascot of the Washingtons had slowly, stealthily circled back.

"Sh!" warned Young Wide Awake, his heart giving a great bound.

Trot sniffed his young master over carefully, anxiously.

Beyond, Young Wide Awake could hear the crackling of the campfire and the voices of the men.

With another very low hiss, to caution the dog, our hero rolled over on his face.

He wiggled his lashed hands all he could, to draw the attention of Trot.

The dog sniffed at the wrists.

"Sic 'em, Trot," whispered the young fireman.

Again he wiggled his hands, and again he "sicked."

Trot caught the idea, for he began to gnaw at the cords.

"Good old fellow!" came the cautious whisper.

Then the mascot knew he was doing just what was wanted, and went industriously on with the chewing.

In less than two minutes Trot had the cords chewed through.

Young Wide Awake wrenched his hands free, rolled and sat up.

His knife freed his feet.

Trot stood by mutely, but looking worlds and wagging his tail joyously.

"Shall I scoot now?" wondered Young Wide Awake.

Then another thought came to him.

Trot could travel with five times as much speed.

Young Wide Awake drew out a note-book and pencil.

In the note-book he wrote fast, describing just where he was and where the yeggmen were. He described the whole thing, plot and all, as well as he could in a brief message.

Then, picking up a bit of the cord, our hero tied the note-book securely around the mascot's neck.

"You understand, Trot?" he whispered in the dog's ear. "Terry, Hal, Joe—quick! You understand? Home!"

Trot wagged his tail, looking anxiously into his young master's eyes.

"That's right—now, home!"

Our hero let go of the dog.

Trot, without even a whine, started softly through the brush.

In another moment he was lost to sight.

"And now," murmured the young fireman, grimly, "it may be better for my own health if I steal softly out of this place."

He was getting to his feet when he heard a gruff voice behind him:

"Here, there, younker! None of that! Stand where you are!"

Young Wide Awake whirled, to find himself looking into

two revolvers, while the other yeggmen were hurrying to the spot.

"The kid we tied is getting away," announced the leader. "But how on earth, kid, did ye ever get out of that lashing?"

"I never saw the man yet who could tie me so that I'd stay tied," replied Young Wide Awake, coolly.

"Then we'll watch you, instead," declared the leader. "This way with you."

Since to disobey was to run a gauntlet of bullets, Wide followed the yeggs back to their campfire.

"Sit down," was the gruff order, and the boy sat.

"Well, you're a bird," uttered the yegg leader.

"I've heard that said before," admitted Young Wide Awake, coolly.

"Tie a rope around the kid's neck and strangle him," growled one of the yeggs. "That's the only thing that'll be safe for us."

"Oh, you don't need to do that," urged our hero, quickly. "I'm no fool. I don't want to die. Even when I untied myself I didn't bolt, as I might have done. Really, I don't want to spoil your game."

"Then you admit that you know what our game is?" demanded the leader, grimly.

"I do, and it's like what you said of me—it's a bird."

"And you'd cook our bird in a second, if you could, eh?"

"Not by a long shot. I don't want to spoil such a pretty scheme. Why, if I thought you fellows would use me on the dead level, square, I could tell you how to make a bigger haul than you're going to to-night."

"What could you tell us?"

"What would I get for it?" counter-questioned Young Wide Awake.

"It'd depend on how much yer tip was worth, and whether we already knew what ye thought ye was tipping us off to," replied the yegg leader.

Young Wide Awake pretended to fence cautiously, at first; then he pretended, finally, to feel more confidence in the good intentions of the others.

At last he was talking freely, all about the bank, the post-office, the mills and other places where safes full of money might be expected.

They don't take much stock in what I'm telling them," muttered Young Wide Awake to himself. "I'm not fooling 'em much. Still, they're in hopes they can pump something out of me that will be worth their while to know."

So, since our hero's only real object was to kill time, he kept on and killed a lot of it.

"Very entertaining, kid, very," broke in the yegg leader, at last.

"That's what I supposed you'd say," uttered Dick, quickly. "You pump me dry, and then you won't turn a dollar my way, after all. You fellows may have nerve, but you're a cheap lot, just the same!"

In the next instant our hero could see that his sudden display of spirit had made far from a bad impression on his hearers.

"Ps-s-s-st!" broke in Jorgins, suddenly. "What's that noise over there in the trees? Boys, it sounds like trouble."

"Prowlers!" whispered another, uneasily.

"Jorgins," murmured the leader, "slip behind the kid."

Jorgins bounded to his post like a flash, his revolver in his hand.

"Stick the muzzle close against the kid's head," whispered the leader. "If ye hear the least sound of trouble, Jorgins, don't wait. Just blow the roof off the kid's head!"

CHAPTER XI.

SETTLING WITH A LUNATIC.

While Jorgins stood at his post, wholly prepared to carry out orders, his four comrades stepped forward into the woods.

"Any one there?" hailed the leader, in a cool, grim voice.

"Yes," came an equally cool answer, in a tone that thrilled Young Wide Awake, for the voice was that of Police Chief Jason Sharp.

"Who are ye?" hailed the yegg.

"The Belmont police."

"Don't come forward, then!" warned the yegg.

"Why not?" queried Sharp, easily.

"You'll be shot if ye do!"

"That's one of my duties as an officer," replied Jason Sharp, coolly. "I'm paid for being shot at. Now, my man, I'm coming through to you, and I mean to explain what's ahead of you. If you fire upon me it will be to your own cost. We've got you surrounded by more armed men than you'd care to face—and others are bringing up the dogs. If you try to break away in any direction you'll be fired on and brought down—then chewed by the dogs. Now hold your tempers for a minute or two, while I come through and talk with you."

Young Wide Awake heard the crunching footsteps before Jason Sharp, alone, and with no weapon in his hands, stepped into view.

Just beyond, out of sight, Trot yelped eagerly, as if he were trying to follow and some one was holding him.

"You men don't want to put up any fight against the trap we've got you in," proposed the doughty little chief, looking swiftly at each of the men. "You haven't got the show that a snowflake would have at the equator. You, there, with a gun at Young Wide Awake's head, put that gun up!"

Jorgins slowly took the muzzle of the weapon away from our hero's head, though he held it ready for quick use.

"Now, the first thing I want you all to do," continued Jason Sharp, briskly, "is to put your guns down on the ground together. Over at the roots of that ash tree will do for a spot. You first," nodding at Jorgins.

"Not until I get the word from my own boss," retorted Jorgins.

"I'm your boss now," retorted Sharp, drily. "Take your gun over and put it at the root of that ash tree."

Jorgins stood sullenly still.

"If I have to repeat that order, my man," spoke the little officer, sharply, "I'll use my office as chief of police to make you good for twenty years behind the bars!"

With a growl Jorgins started over to the ash to deposit his revolver.

That broke the whole spirit of fight.

One after another, as ordered, the yeggs marched over to the ash tree, depositing their guns.

Sharp now turned, speaking to those out of sight.

"I want one of you to come out of the line beyond," he said, "and take charge of the guns of these yeggs."

"Me?" proposed Terry Rourke's voice, eagerly.

"Yes, you'll do, Rourke."

Terry and Trot came scampering to the scene and made a bee-line for the ash tree.

"You, Young Wide Awake, can help me now," observed the chief, as Terry picked up a pair of the revolvers. "We'll iron these chaps."

The chief drew out a pair of handcuffs.

Our hero snapped them on the wrists of the leader.

Then another pair were fitted, and another.

"Are they all secure?" asked Sharp, at last.

"All fast, chief."

Sharp stepped over to the ash tree, loading revolvers into his pockets.

"Now, you men step forward," he ordered. "And you two youngsters, when you get through shaking hands with each other, can help me tend this herd through to town."

The little posse and its prisoners reached the fields beyond.

"Say," growled the leader of the yeggs, "where's the rest of your crew?"

"Crew?" echoed the little chief.

"Well, your posse, then?"

"You see all there is to it," remarked Sharp, quietly.

"What?"

"Fact!"

"Say," quivered the leader of the yeggs, "ye don't mean to tell me that ye held the five of us up with the help of a dog and a small boy?"

"Small boy, am Oi?" growled Terry, resentfully.

"I didn't have any gun at the time," replied Jason Sharp, more quietly than ever.

"Ye didn't have any—say, don't tell me ye pinched the whole tough gang of us with nothing but your nerve?"

"Why, I would have brought a revolver, perhaps," drawled Chief Sharp, "but I found that five pairs of handcuffs were all the metal I wanted to carry. More steel would have sagged my pockets and spoiled the fit of my clothes."

"And ye bagged us just with yer nerve?" snarled the yegg leader, wonderingly.

"With that and the majesty of the law behind me," admitted the doughty little chief.

The yeggs swore loudly and roundly, but it was too late now to sulk or balk.

They were marched into town and jailed.

Later on it was discovered that all were hard characters who were "wanted" elsewhere.

"'Twas me that Trot reached first," Terry explained to our hero. "Oi was all alone at the engine house when Trot, the doggy darlin', came bolting in. When Oi got star-rted on you're note 'twas me in steam shoes for the station house."

"Shar-rp read the note, too, and thin he star-rted. He said there wasn't toime t' pick up another policeman, an', besides, we could do better than a crowd, which wud make too much noise. Shure, but the little man is the one that has his nerve in his pocket."

Once they reached the town, a wondering crowd formed at their heels and followed.

In the meantime another member of Washington One had come upon some excitement all his own.

Brad Thompson was passing through Davis street, opposite an old tenement house that had been condemned and was about to be pulled down to make way for a more handsome structure.

As his glance swept carelessly past the windows, Brad gave a sudden gasp and a start, then stopped and swallowed hard.

For, for just a second or so, at one of the windows on the top floor, he caught sight of a wild face.

"The fire fiend!" gasped Brad.

The face did not appear there again.

"Why, that house was searched all the way through," quavered the young fireman, darting across the street.

He tried the street door, which yielded and let him in.

With never a thought beyond getting within eye-range of the fire fiend, Brad started up the stairs.

He went on tip-toe up three flights to the top floor.

There he halted, looking all around him.

"That must be the door to the room that the fire fiend was in," trembled Brad. "I wonder if he's in there now?"

With all stealth, Brad Thompson crept closer to the door.

Yank! The door flew open so swiftly that ere the young fireman could dart back he was seized by the collar and dragged into the room.

"So, I've got you, you little meddler, you mischief-maker!" chuckled a harsh voice. "I've caught you, have I?"

Slam! Brad was hurled to the floor so hard that it knocked him out.

When he came to it was with a quiver of terror.

Fire was crackling in the room, where the maniac fire fiend had started it.

Brad found his wrists and arms tied tightly, while the fire fiend, chuckling hoarsely, was skipping about with a blazing torch.

CHAPTER XII.

CONCLUSION.

It was still an hour before supper, and Slam Bang, who was hungry, as he often was through the day, slipped into his mother's pantry.

Slam was the champion eater of the Washingtons—and of all Belmont, for that matter.

He ate something whenever he thought of it.

He carried cookies and sandwiches to school with him.

He was always on the hunt for something new and good to eat.

His pocket money, whenever he had any, almost invariably passed over the cashier's counter in a restaurant.

Tradition had it that Slam got up twice, at least, every night and went downstairs for something to eat.

"I need something just to tide me over until supper-time," uttered Slam, as he eyed the pantry shelves.

Slam's delighted gaze fell upon a mince pie, with deliciously browned, flaky, puffy crust.

"Bully!" he gasped, and grabbed the whole pie up from the plate.

He took a huge bite, his eyes rolling with joy.

But at that instant he happened to glance out of the pantry window.

He saw flames coming from one of the upper windows of that deserted tenement in Davis Street.

"Fire!" he choked.

He looked down at the rest of the pie for just a second.

Then, breaking it in two pieces, he bolted from the pantry, stopped in the hallway only long enough to grab his cap, and then he bolted for the nearest fire-alarm box.

He pulled in the alarm, then glanced happily down at the pie.

He took his time about eating the pie, relishing every morsel as only a hungry being can.

Then, carefully wiping his mouth, that there might be no tell-tale evidence left, he waited for Washington One.

The alarm had been answered in record time.

By the time that the hose was coupled, Hook and Ladder One was on the spot.

It had been drawn by citizens, however, only one of the hook and ladder crew having reported in time to get the truck out.

"Never mind; we've got enough to handle the ladder work," cried Young Wide Awake. "Run off the longest ladder, there! Be ready to follow me up with the hose, Hal! Give a dandy good stream when we call for it, Joe! Terry, lead three or four axemen!"

In a jiffy the ladder was swung in place.

With Young Wide Awake at their head, the young firemen of Belmont swarmed up that ladder.

In the room Brad stood tied to the door, paralyzed with fright.

"I'll give ye a good taste of what fire's like!" roared the maniac, thrusting the blazing torch close to the captive fireman's face.

"Hurrah! We've got the fire fiend at last!" roared Young Wide Awake, bursting in through the window.

Wheeling, with a dog-like snarl, the maniac sprang at our hero, brandishing the torch.

"I'll burn your eyes out!" he growled.

Clash!

Young Wide Awake's fire hook struck against the torch, dashing it from the fire fiend's hand.

Like a flash Terry grappled with the lunatic from behind.

They went over in a twinkling, and the fire fiend, subdued only through sheer exhaustion, was hustled out into the hallway, where four fellows sat on him until Chief Jason Sharp could be called up from the street to handcuff him.

A full minute of Washington's prompt, full stream put out the last sparks of the blaze.

Then young firemen and citizens thronged up the stairs for a glimpse of the fire fiend.

He was a raving, violent lunatic, pure and simple, as crazy as a March hare.

"We'll soon have you home, my man, in the dark cell and the strait-jacket," muttered Chief Sharp, grimly.

Down in the streets the news flew as if by magic.

Then the people surged away to follow the fire fiend on his march to the station house.

By the time that Washington's apparatus had been housed again the streets all around the station house were blocked by the crowd.

Whistles blew, bells rang, and tinkling telephone bells all over Belmont summoned people to hear the wonderful news:

"The fire fiend—the real one—has been caught at last. Young Wide Awake and his firemen got him!"

Brad was congratulated on every side, and praised so that his face took on a blush that lasted all the evening.

Perhaps Slam Bang was the happiest of any one.

For that hungry youngster let it get out, accidentally, how he happened to discover the fire.

Then a committee of delighted citizens pounced upon Slam and carried him by force, though a willing prisoner, to the finest restaurant in Belmont.

It was a little before half-past six when Slam found himself at table.

He rested occasionally, but it was nearly ten o'clock when he finally rose, slowly, from what he frankly declared to be the "finest and most satisfying feed of my life!"

The din and the excitement seemed to bring out every one in Belmont.

Just as dark was coming on the great twin lights of the Lester auto were seen up Main Street, coming nearer.

John Lester and the inmates of his house had received the news, eagerly telephoned to them by Master Ted.

Mr. Lester was in the auto car, as were Kitty and Faith.

Young Wide Awake and Terry quickly found their way to the car as it drew up before the post-office.

They were plied with questions, but soon John Lester stopped them.

"Halstead, Rourke," he murmured, "you've got so confusingly much to tell that it will take an entire evening to hear it all. May I impose upon your time—or have you some other engagement?"

"If we had," our hero replied, with a swift side glance

at his sweetheart's face, "it wouldn't take us long to break it."

"Then we'll whizz home and send the car after you. You're to bring your appetites and dine with us, remember."

The mayor and council met that evening.

They assembled to discuss the paying of the reward which had been offered for the capture of the fire fiend.

It was soon settled that Brad could not be considered the captor, since, instead of capturing the fire fiend, the latter had caught Brad.

Nor could Young Wide Awake be considered entitled to the reward, since he had been merely at the head of the captors.

It was finally decided by the town fathers that the reward of five hundred dollars should go properly to Washington One as a company.

Later the young men had to decide, by discussion and vote, how the money should be expended.

At Young Wide Awake's suggestion it was decided to use it for fitting up their upstairs hall at the engine house as a more enjoyable clubroom for leisure hours.

Some wanted a pool table, others wanted other things.

The vote finally passed, however, to buy boxing gloves, a wrestling mat, a horizontal bar and some other gymnastic sundries, with which the members could always keep themselves in the best condition for their fire duties.

"For," as their young captain put it, "all things being equal, the best fireman is the one who's strongest."

So the things were bought and the money that was left remained in the company's treasury for use at some other time.

"However, on the evening of the capture, Young Wide Awake and Terry hurried to their homes and dressed in record time, then stepped into the Lester auto and were whirled away to a dinner amid the happiest surroundings.

At the dinner-table both boys were kept busy detailing their adventures of the day.

After the dinner Mr. Lester and Mr. Vane went away to enjoy their cigars in the library.

Mrs. Lester and Mrs. Vane withdrew to the drawing-room, while the young people, except Ted, who went back to town, drifted into the music-room.

"Bedad," Terry sighed in Young Wide Awake's ear, when he found a chance, "Oi'm wondhering how long this can lasht."

"So am I," admitted Wide, his face clouding.

"Where are you going, boys?" asked Kitty, looking around from the piano, where she had been standing beside Faith.

"Will you excuse us a few moments, please?" begged Wide, who had gripped Terry by the cuff of his coat-sleeve.

Rourke was wondering as our hero led him through the hallway, then tapped on the library door.

"Come in," called Mr. Lester.

"We have come, sir," said Young Wide Awake, as the young firemen stood before the two fathers, "to ask what

may seem a strange question. But we feel that we had better ask it."

"Shure we'd better ask the question," muttered Terry, under his breath. "But what's the question, Oi wondher?"

"Go on," urged Mr. Lester, blowing out a cloud of smoke.

Young Wide Awake's face was unwontedly pale as he went on:

"Mr. Lester and Mr. Vane, we've been calling here on your daughters rather frequently of late. We have enjoyed it—have been happy, in fact. We hope we may be allowed to continue calling in the future. But we don't want to intrude where we don't belong, or where we're not wanted. We don't want to seem presuming, so we've come to ask you frankly and honestly your wishes in the matter. I can only say, more than that, gentlemen, that we shall naturally bind ourselves to your answer."

"Your question, as far as you've asked it, is easily answered," said John Lester, plainly. "You are both honest, brave, gentle, enterprising and manly young fellows, from all that I hear. Your conduct is excellent at all times. I can find no fault with either of you, and find much in both of you to admire. The further decision must rest with the young ladies themselves. For my part, you are always welcome, and more than welcome, here—and I know that I speak for my wife as well."

"Mrs. Vane's sentiments and mine are very similar," said Mr. Vane, simply as he reached for another cigar, then turned and held out his hand to the young men.

When the two young firemen found themselves in the hall again, Terry could not keep from hugging his chum.

"Oh, Wide! Wide!" he choked. "Ye've always yure nerve wid ye, and yure winning way, too!"

Five minutes later each had told his sweetheart, in his own way.

"I'm glad you went at papa so frankly," Kitty smiled sweetly into Young Wide Awake's eyes. "Papa will respect you more for it, too."

THE END.

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